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GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA: SOCIAL POLICIES AND THE UN'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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ABSTRACT
Cuba's social policies are highly distinctive. They form an integral package developed over many decades. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 provide a relevant external yardstick that fits quite well with Havana's current plans. But substantial further governance innovations would be required to bring the two together. The Díaz-Canel administration needs an attractive and unifying project, and a reinvigorated social policy agenda could provide the best option.

I INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Cuba faces severe difficulties on multiple fronts – the Covid pandemic; the intensification of unilateral US sanctions; the foundering of *chavismo* in Venezuela; the slow exit of the old *fidelistas*; and the pinched horizons of the island's youth generation. 2020 is shaping up as a year of crisis as grave as the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1990. That previous watershed was followed by a traumatic "special period" during which most outsiders and not a few islanders suspected that the 1959 Revolution might topple. Yet, in the post-Cold War era, Cuban communism has now remained in control for as long as its tenure under Soviet protection.

A quarter century ago I reviewed ten books about the condition of Cuba after the "special period" for the London Review of Books, under the title "Cuba Down at Heel" (Whitehead 1995).The best seller of the collection was by Andres Oppenheimer (still lead analyst for the *Miami Herald*) entitled *Castro's Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba.* My main comment on this was "One could equally argue that the readers of the *Miami Herald* should be preparing for Castro's

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final decade, rather than his final hour". In the event Fidel Castro stood down as President in 2008, and died in 2016. At the IX Plenum of April 2019 the Cuban Communist Party set out its National Economic and Social Plan through 2030. My 1995 article ended as follows: "Virtually all the criticisms now to be heard of the Castro regime were already apparent by the time of my first visit in September 1968. To understand what has happened to the people of the island in the intervening years – and therefore what kind of a society Cuba can achieve in the next thirty – we need studies of health, of housing, of justice, more than we need further studies of the Gran Senor, the *predicador* and his courtiers".

This Working Paper is about social policies in Cuba, and therefore focuses on such specific topics as health, education, housing, employment, and inequality. Since the focus is also contemporary it is essential to include some consideration of the present Covid-19 pandemic, which should certainly be analyzed as a health crisis, but which clearly extends from there into all other areas of social policy, via its economic and employment impact.

Even before the pandemic, these topics could not be fully addressed in isolation from each other, or from the economic and governance settings in which they must operate. For example, domestic health policies cannot be properly understood without also attending to the international commitments that Cuba has made concerning the deployment of its health personnel overseas, nor the dual currency system which affects the pricing and availability of pharmaceutical products that may be distributed both through the local and the convertible currency markets. Similar considerations affect education, and employment policies. This was so even before the recent worsening of the foreign exchange constraint as a result of the crisis in Venezuela, the termination of medical service contracts in much of South America, the tightening of the US embargo, and as a final blow the Covid-based collapse of tourism.

So, it makes sense to situate these social policy issues in the context of some very distinctive contemporary Cuban governance challenges. Yet these social policy problems should also be examined from within an international framework. Cuban exceptionalism is real (Hoffmann & Whitehead, 2007), but can be misused for propagandistic purposes. It needs to be assessed in a non-partisan comparative manner. This requires some external yardsticks that are not part of the usual pro- and anti-regime polemics, but that provide a constructive perspective on Cuba's relative strengths and weaknesses, and the policy objectives it might prioritize over the coming decade- especially after the regime's previous ambition to "build a communist society" was dropped in the 2018 constitutional revision. Fortunately, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 have been endorsed both by the government in Havana and by its external critics. Although highly aspirational and somewhat imprecise, these goals provide a set of objectives (even "deliverables") that can be calibrated and tested for realism both on the island, and throughout the western hemisphere and indeed the whole world.

All that this summary paper can offer is a very synoptic outline of these issues, as they appear to me looking at the island from this external and comparative perspective. The aim is not to provide either a comprehensive or an in-depth account of these matters, but rather to highlight some distinctive features of the Cuban case that need to be taken into account both when examining specific social policy dilemmas and when attempting to devise workable reforms.

The first part of the paper reviews the main social policy areas, while the second half turns to the questions of "governance" that arise. Here it is important to start with a disclaimer. My main expertise is in "comparative democratization", but my decision here is not to enter into such overworked and underspecified questions.[1] For the purpose of this paper "governance challenges" will refer only to those policy alternatives and methods of rule currently in operation on the island-.i.e. as determined by the prevailing constitution and legal-administrative structures. But, as the 2018 reform of the 1976 Socialist Constitution made clear, within the existing system there is a generational transfer of power under way, and society is articulating a range of new social demands and expectations. These constitute unquestionable "governance challenges" that can be examined from a comparative perspective, even on the (admittedly disputed) working assumption that something close to the current power structure (and existing 'rules of the game') continues to regulate policy formation over the coming years.

1. In two previous publications I analyzed Cuba's post-Cold War political prospects as viewed from my "transitions to democ-

II SIX MAJOR SOCIAL POLICY AREAS

a) Health Care

Before 1959 Cuba already displayed some relative strength as a centre for medical expertise. After the Revolution the new regime dedicated exceptional priority to the development of a comprehensive, universal, and high quality health capacity, free at the point of use (article 72 of the current constitution). In due course it also made international medical training and assistance a key part of its foreign policy, paying particular attention to the health needs of the poor in various underprovided parts of the Third World. This was a deliberate and sustained policy choice, no doubt partly motivated by the wish to contrst the benefits of a socialist approach to healthcare with the limitations of the privatized and market-based system prevalent in the USA.

Even before the current pandemic Cuba's distinctive approach was widely recognized as a constructive alternative to western orthodoxies, although it inevitably also attracted much criticism and hostility from the advocates of marketized health-care. (The core of the criticism was that politicized medical provision denied free choice either both to the patient and to the care-giver). Current Cuban provision can be compared with international Sustainable Development Goal 3c (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015), viz to "substantially increase health financing, recruitment, development, training, and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing States". The time horizon for the SDGs is 2030.

According to the December 2018 update of the WHO's Global Health Workforce Statistics, the total number of Cuban medical doctors was 95,487- out of a total population of 11.3 million. This would equate to 84.2 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants and is considerably higher than anywhere else in the world.[2] Second to Cuba is Georgia with 71.2, then Uruguay with 50.8. Italy has 39.8 doctors per 10,000 people, Spain 38.7, the UK 28.1, and the USA 26.1.[3] Elsewhere in Latin America Argentina follows after Uruguay with 39.9, Mexico has 22.8. By contrast in Guatemala there are only 3.5, in Honduras 3.1, and in Haiti just 2.3 doctors per 10,000 people. Cuba also rates very highly on nurses, and hospital beds per capita.

Cuban exceptionalism in the healthcare field extends beyond domestic provision- it is estimated that over the past half century Cuban universities have turned out over 100,000 medically qualified personnel, not only nationals but also students from about 80 other nations, who received their education for free. The state-run company *Servicios Médicos Cubanos S.A.* supplies medical personnel on contract to a large number of other countries whose own health provision fails to reach the poorest and most vulnerable- e.g. until 2019 in Bolivia, Brazil, and currently in Argentina as well as South Africa, and several Caribbean states including Haiti, and most prominently Venezuela. Since the pandemic they have supplied scores of doctors and nurses to Northern Italy to help with the Covid-19 crises there, as well as to Andorra and Qatar. In total there are currently 28,760 Cuban health professionals serving abroad, (including 14 Henry Reeve International Brigades specialized in emergency help in cases of natural catastrophes or outbreaks of epidemic diseases, composed in total of about 1,400 medical personnel). Overseas health services provide the island's largest single source of foreign exchange.

It is important to add here that those who receive free state medical education are expected to pursue their subsequent careers as public servants, obeying instructions as to where they work, and accepting the very low levels of remuneration, even for severe hardship postings. Well paid medics in

racy" perspective. Both in 2007 and again in 2016 I concluded that Cuban "exceptionalism" made it foolhardy to predict a conventional democratization any time soon. But eventually there is likely to be some easing of the ideological polarization that has for so long blocked the emergence of any "middle" options. However my verdict was that the timing and context of any such shift remained extremely indeterminate, making its democratic content open to a spectrum of possibilities. That remains my view even in mid-2020. (In Hoffmann & Whitehead [2007] I used Benjamin Constant as the template, and in Whitehead [2016] I reflected on the uncertain implications of the tentative overture from President Obama.)

2. When discounting the medical personnel on overseas missions the rate still is around an admirably high 68 doctors on the island per 10,000 inhabitants. The WHO acknowledges issues of data comparability, and relies on the International Standard Classification of Occupations.
3. According to the Migration Policy Institute (Gelatt, 2020), 29% of all US physicians are foreign-born, so the ratio of US doctors per 10,000 is below 20, (as is the ratio of UK doctors). Whereas poor Cuba contributes doctors to the Global South, these rich anglo-saxon democracies raid the human capital paid for by less-developed nation taxpayers.

other countries, who are not themselves willing to face this degree of hardship to serve their people, have been quick to condemn the Cuban state for (allegedly) "profiteering" by retaining a very high proportion of the ensuing foreign currency payments (75% is the ratio reported from Brazil). Some also assert that the quality of Cuban health provision falls short of the standards that the more privileged sectors of their populations would expect. But such criticism often seems self-interested, and displays little interest in addressing the health inequities that Cuban assistance prioritizes, (it has been claimed that some 10% of Brazilian municipalities had no source of medical expertise apart from the recently expelled Cubans[4]).

There is a further international strand to health care policy that also requires mention. In some areas (such as meningitis, skin pigmentation, melanoma, and anti-amputation treatment for severe diabetics), and on some research fronts (e.g. anti-viral Recombinant Human Interferon Alpha 2-B, used in a joint venture with China as a possible therapy against Covid-19), Cuba is a world research leader, and not merely a provider of basic care – e.g. it has anti-Ebola and anti-meningitis expertise that may be adaptable for the treatment of Covid-19.[5] Health tourism has become an important strand in foreign exchange earnings, with treatments provided cheaply and safely to paying foreign visitors. Moreover, top international political figures (from Saddam Hussein to Lula da Silva, Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales) have judged Cuban health care both politically secure and professionally reliable.

But finally, the key tests for this very distinctive approach to a crucial area of public policy are how well it serves the basic health needs of an ageing and relatively impoverished population on the island, and how sustainable this great fiscal effort can be, given all the competing demands on state resources, and the multiple scarcities and bottlenecks that afflict the rationing system under the pressure of a longstanding unilateral US embargo. Those were massive challenges even before the US reinforced its sanctions against the regime, and the partnership with Venezuela became destabilized. Many basic medicines (such as aspirin) are in extremely scarce supply in most Cuban clinics.

It still remains to be seen how well Cuba will emerge, compared to its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors, as the pandemic progresses across the island (Blofield *et al.* 2020). The very early signs are that strong domestic containment (with 67 isolation centers across the island that provide 10,000 beds) and close contact tracing (8.7 million out of 11.2m Cubans were screened by health workers at the end of March) may "flatten the curve" relatively well, but the knock-on effect on related social policies could prove very damaging (Morris & Kelman, 2020). On the positive side, close medical supervision of the entire population may serve to contain the pandemic. On the negative side, critics of the regime have been quick to cast doubt on the credibility of its claims about health performance, given its centralized control over information, and the political stakes involved.[6]

Let us therefore turn to another key determinant of public health, namely –

b) Food Security

The UN's SDG 2 is to "end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture". Here too Cuban public policy has long been strongly at variance with that of virtually all other nations in the western hemisphere, and at least by comparison with its main Caribbean neighbors the island's policy exceptionalism has delivered some striking positive results – although as we shall see at a high cost, and with a big question mark over its "sustainability".

Until Soviet aid came to an end in 1990 the "canasta básica" of rationed food for every household provided a more or less guaranteed supply of basic foodstuffs sufficient to eradicate malnutrition and

4. On February 18th 2020 *El País* reported that there were still 757 medical posts in the most vulnerable municipalities that were vacant due to "abandonment" by the Brazilian personnel hired to replace the Cubans expelled by the Bolsonaro administration in November 2018.
5. The California-based medical journal MEDICC has a long record of expert coverage of Cuban healthcare. The April 2020 issue (vol 22., no. 2) provides remarkably full and precise information about Covid-19 and the island's initial responses.
6. Partly to counter this challenge the Health Ministry adheres to WHO definitions, and provides exceptionally detailed daily hospital reports, giving biometric and treatment details for each acute and critical case handled, as well as for every death (79 as of May 16th).

hunger- although not necessarily to provide a satisfactorily varied and nutritionally optimal food supply to the people. However, collectivized agriculture and the obligatory delivery of smallholder output to the state at low prices failed to deliver a domestic food surplus, as the eminent French agronomist René Dumont had foreseen half a century ago (Dumont, 1970). Instead the provision of the canasta came to depend upon imported supplies, and when foreign exchange became unavailable the "sustainability" of the Cuban food security system became unreliable. Some efforts at reform and import substitution were forced on the regime during the "special period" of extreme hardship in the early to mid -1990s, but as soon as dollars became more abundant (thanks to western tourist revenues and help from Venezuela) reliance on domestic production was allowed to slip again. (Cuba ranked 186th in a recent listing of countries by agricultural growth (Nation Master a). This is a remarkable policy choice, not only given the favorable climate and soil conditions of the island, but also given the demonstration in Vietnam, China and elsewhere that a more market liberal approach could quickly generate a food surplus, without putting the ruling party's control of the state in jeopardy.

In 2017 Cuba imported $246m worth of poultry meat; $177m wheat; $165m milk concentrate; $155m corn; $100m soybean meal; $82m animal feed; $57m rice; $28m coffee; $26m beer; $22m cheese; $9m pig meat; $8m butter; $8m potatoes, and so on. The island's overall food imports for that year exceeded its total value of goods exports ($1.41 billion), and accounted for over 30% of all its imports (OEC, 2020). Many of the items on this import list could have been produced somewhere on the island (half of its arable land is said to be uncultivated). A substantial proportion of food imports were destined to supply the tourist market which expected higher food quality than Cuban agriculture (with its guaranteed and low priced market outlets) were accustomed to deliver. In April 2020 it was reported that local producers had just discovered to their surprise that they could supply Cuban sourced hamburger meat and hash browns that would be competitive with the imported counterpart.

A further key reason why imported foodstuffs have displaced local sourcing is the poor state of the domestic transport system-

c) Transportation

SDG target 11.2 aims at providing access to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems for all… notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to those in vulnerable situations.

Cuba is, of course, famous for its carefully preserved stock of pre-1959 US gas guzzlers, which were imported at a time of low oil prices and close integration with the Florida economy. A surprising number of these are still on the road (often powered by much more modern and economical Japanese engines). 60,000 are reportedly still in existence, but their annual average mileage is very low. Beyond that niche market there were only 173,000 automobiles in operation in 2004 (very low for a population of 11 million), and although current numbers may be twice that level the roads remain remarkably car free by the standards of all other western hemisphere nations (in a recent listing Cuba ranked 134th in motor vehicles per thousand (Nation Master b) A high proportion of the automobiles in circulation are held by the public sector or for tourist hire.[7] Bicycles offer an alternative private transport option, although they are accident-prone. Electric bicycles have recently made some progress.

There is clearly an unusual opportunity here to develop strong public transport alternative that corresponds to SDG 11.2 specifications. Before US sanctions were tightened and the pandemic hit some progress had been made in this direction. For example, modern diesel buses from China had upgraded the worn-out urban network, and Beijing had also helped improve the long range (essentially Havana-Santiago) rail freight connection. However, feeder roads and secondary lines remain severely underdeveloped, and in current conditions only the most essential public transport links are likely to be fully maintained. In particular, undercapitalized rural and agricultural locations face further limitations to provision, and that is likely to impede agile food import substitution. Poor public transport cover-

7. If, as reported by Guardian environmental editor Damian Carrington (April 20th 2020) there is a strong correlation between the lethality of Covid-19 and the concentration of NO2 particles in the urban atmosphere, then Cuba's exceptionally low vehicle density will assist the authorities in their campaigns against the virus.

age also handicaps the health system, including its responsiveness to the Covid-19 epidemic. (On the positive side, it may also slow the rate of growth of the disease, and facilitate collective acceptance of 'lockdown' instructions). All but essential inter-provincial traffic flows are currently shut down.

Another issue for management of the epidemic concerns

d) Housing

SDG 11 is "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable". SDG 11.1 is to provide "safe and affordable housing and basic services". The UN-Habitat program and its New Urban Agenda note that although there is a rising stock of spare and unoccupied properties in the world, for most of the population housing is not affordable, and for many it is neither safe nor supplied with basic services.

In housing - as in so many other areas of social policy- Cuba is an outlier (article 71 of the current Constitution). The Revolution suppressed renting and eliminated mortgages and the market in real estate. Owing to the 1959 Urban Reform Law over 85% of Cubans own their homes (or at least reside in housing owned by someone in their family) but this is combined with a long struggle with "issues of insufficient housing supply both in terms of the shortage of available units and the lack of resources to maintain and improve the existing stock" (Grein, 2015: 1). The Revolution views housing as a social service and not a means of production or investment. But unlike health or education housing involves private property. In the absence of a market it was officially estimated that in 2012 7 out of 10 Havana houses were in need of major repairs. There were 3.9 million residential units for a population of 11.3 million, but this still left an estimated shortfall of 500,000. Each year the government built about 16,000, and there was also said to be private construction of about 10,000, but- for example- in 2012 Hurricane Sandy destroyed 22,000 dwellings. Belatedly- half a century after the revolutionary Reform Law- in 2011, Decree 288 opened up a private real estate market, although mortgages remained forbidden and only nationals are allowed to buy, and no-one can own more than two homes.

1,100 government building supply centers had been opened by 2015, and limited government grants for home improvements have been made available. Although renting is once again allowed, evictions are not permitted and tenants have no redress if landlords fail to maintain the premises.

So Cuba approaches SDG 11.1 from a very different angle from all the other nations of the western hemisphere, where renting and private ownership (including property speculation and self-construction) prevail. It is reasonable to argue that existing Latin American property markets do not favor the fulfillment of the UN's goals for 2030. But it is equally clear that in Cuba half a century of blanket suppression of market forces has also not proved the best way to secure "safe, resilient, and sustainable" housing for all. Decree 288 does at least constitute a recognition of the resulting shortfalls, but on its own it does not overcome them. To achieve that some kind of more flexible and responsive system of supply would be needed, and existing personal ownership rights would need to be expanded (notably in the area of housing finance).

e) Education

Cuba was outstandingly advanced in achieving SDG 4 sixty plus years ahead of schedule. This UN goal proposes that all girls and boys complete free primary and secondary schooling by 2030. It also aims to provide equal access to affordable vocational training, and to eliminate gender and wealth disparities with the aim of achieving universal access to a quality higher education.

In today's Cuba education is free, universal, and compulsory for all aged between 6 and 17 (article 73 of the current Constitution). The island has been ranked first in the world on government spending on education as a proportion of GDP (Nation Master c). There is near universal literacy and few drop-outs (and no private schools to cream off an elite). The maximum class size is 25 per teacher (with a target of 15 in secondary schools). Free school meals are provided for all, with the result that –in contrast to everywhere else in Latin America (apart perhaps from Uruguay)- child malnutrition is rare. Obesity is

also minimized, as is violence in schools.[8] In rural areas where electricity is unreliable the schools are equipped with solar panels.

Post-secondary and higher education is also free, and the gender balance is good (evidence on the racial balance is harder to come by, but see Hansing & Hoffmann, 2020), and in at least some major fields (notably medicine, also applied sciences) of a competitive international standard- although some other disciplines are too politically sensitive for the authorities to tolerate full expression. Economics has risen in prestige and quality since the fall of the USSR, and economists are allowed more scope than other social scientists to "tell it like it is". Cuba's outstanding cultural output (musical, pictorial, theatrical, cinematic and literary) indicates that the humanities continue to thrive, whether supported (or not) by the authorities (for unsupported cultural creativity see, for example, Dabène, 2020).

A more detailed and ethnographic investigation of Cuban education would no doubt uncover limitations to this positive account. Neither teachers nor students are allowed to be too free-thinking, and - as is the case in all countries- provision varies somewhat in quality from privileged to deprived neighborhoods and social sectors. In a previous essay I made brief reference to the similarities between Cuban and "Spartan" social models (Hoffmann & Whitehead, 2007: 20), and it is probably still correct to evaluate the island's educational achievements and limitations from that perspective. It is worth noting that Sparta would perform rather well by SDG 11.1 standards. The main issue would concern the word "quality". How far does thorough and comprehensive training of all go towards satisfying the requirement for quality education (quite a long way in all those Latin American nations where it is conspicuous for its absence) – or is the encouragement of questioning and critical thinking (perhaps Athenian style) also an indispensable feature of a quality education?

Wherever we stand on that debate, Cuba's successes in mass education deserve recognition, and potentially provide the foundation for further improvements. Most Latin American nations are not so favorably situated. Looking to the future a critical issue will be that the current workforce (not to mention the next generation of Cuban citizens) will need a level of digital literacy that is hard to develop when IT resources are so limited, and the authorities are distrustful of horizontal and unauthorized channels of communication. Which brings us to a final area of social policy –

f) Employment

SDG 8 includes "full and productive employment and decent work for all", notably including social protection, and work opportunities for the young and for vulnerable minorities. This is close to articles 68/9 of the current Cuban Constitution.

On the bare ILO statistics Cuba appears well-placed by these criteria. For example, the 2012 labor force participation rate is given as 74.2%; the 2015 unemployment rate as 2.4% (6.1% for youth in 2010); with 41 mean weekly hours actually worked per employed person in 2010; an 81.4% trade union density rate (2008); and excellent figures on health and safety at work, etc.

But there is also one much more troubling figure in the series – in 2010 the average monthly earnings of employees in Cuban pesos was 448, which equates to less than a dollar a day at the official exchange rate (all numbers taken from ILOSTAT). The World Bank's international poverty line recently stood at $1.90 a day – although there is also a $3.20 threshold, and much debate about purchasing power parity calculations. The Cuban earnings number differs from the WB concept, since the former is per worker while the latter is per capita. On the other hand, the WB figure refers to total income, whereas in Cuba benefits such as free education and health care, and home ownership and the canasta básica all constitute major non-monetary income supplements. In Cuba it is only the actual direct remuneration for employment that is exiguous, so the WB poverty line is not comparable.[9] In fact the

8. The true quality of Cuban educational attainments has become a matter of polemic within the US since Senator Sanders praised this aspect of the Revolution. For a counterblast see the Hoover Institution's Professor Paul E. Peterson "Cuban Schools: Too Good to be True" (Education*Next,* March 16th 2020).
9. It has been claimed that in the Soviet Union during the 1980s about 60% of all worker income was channeled through various kinds of collective funding, rather than paid as wages (Mandel, 1988).

domestic market does deliver goods priced in peso that the whole labour force can afford, so the dollar conversion calculation is misleading. But psychologically the calculation is very demoralizing, and those trapped in a peso economy are very poor compared to those who van access dollars. So these exceptionally low official weekly earnings explain why most Cubans are accustomed to undertaking shadow activities designed to "*resolver*" their income shortfalls. This also lends credence to the ironic slogan "they pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work".[10]

Over the past decade the island's labor market has shifted considerably, greatly eroding role of the overpadded public sector as monopoly provider of employment. An accurate portrayal of the rise of private employment is beyond the scope of this paper. In broad terms, only about 8% of the labor force were said to be in the non-state sector at the end of the 1980s, whereas according to the CTC trade union in December 2018 the ratio had quadrupled to 32% (non-state includes workers in co-operatives as well as the smaller private sector). 62% of the workers registered in the non-state sector are affiliated to the sole trade union confederation via over 7,000 grass roots union organizations (EFE, 2019).There are currently 123 activities authorized for private work, but since these are classified as 'self-employed' they have much less social protection than those in the co-operative sector. Beyond these recognized means of employment the "informal" sector is extremely marginal by comparison with the rest of the sub-continent, and organized crime and gang extorsion are effectively suppressed.

All these six social policy areas are interconnected, and need to be evaluated as a package. We have seen that overall they correspond to the specifications of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals to an unusual extent, in contrast to all of Cuba's neighbors. But it is also apparent that this matrix was far from satisfactory even before the loss of Venezuelan largesse, the tightening of the US embargo, and arrival of the Covid pandemic. For at least the past decade the authorities in Havana have been attempting to "actualizar" their inherited social policy model in order to mitigate these deficiencies- but so far with very limited success. The crisis conditions of 2020, and the shortfalls compared to UN SDG ambitions, reinforce the view that the Díaz-Canel administration is confronting extremely grave and long-term structural challenges across the whole social policy spectrum. Accordingly the second half of this paper turns to the "governance" problems that will need to be addressed if the Cuban people are to obtain the social benefits which both the Cuban Constitution (as revised in 2018) and the UN's SDG's portray as their due.

III GOVERNANCE OF THE SOCIAL POLICIES MATRIX:

In October 2019 the 600 member Cuban National Assembly unanimously "elected"[11] Miguel Díaz-Canel as President of the Republic, in accordance with the constitutional reform that had been ratified by public plebiscite the previous year. The presidency had been abolished in 1976, under Cuba's "socialist" constitution of that year. Although it has now been revived, and the formal government has been strengthened *vis a vis* the Cuban Communist Party, according to the constitution the CCP remains "la fuerza dirigente superior de la sociedad y el Estado", and Raúl Castro will continue as its First Secretary until the 2021 Party Congress, when -according to him - he will step down in favor of Díaz-Canel (who at 59 is 29 years his junior). More broadly, Cuba is currently in the midst of an inter-generational transfer of responsibilities, with the founding cohort of geriatric guerrilla fighters giving way- in a planned and orderly manner- to a new cohort of state and party bureaucrats whose claims to authority derive from their governmental competence rather than their historic struggles. The 2018 modified rules set age and term limits to the new post-holders, in striking contrast to the lifelong entitlements of their predecessors.

From the outset Díaz-Canel and his colleagues have faced a multitude of governance challenges on

10. The phrase is amusing, and evidence is scarce, but in reality worker supervision, peer group pressure, and even party loyalty inducements probably generate significant labor performance in the absence of decent monetary incentives to work hard.
11. Ken Jowitt's comparative classification of Leninist regimes distinguishes between a "consolidation" phase that corresponds closely to Cuba's 1976 Constitution, and an "inclusion" phase that matches well with the 2018 revisions (Jowitt, 1992, ch. 3). He does, however, differentiate between Leninist regimes, and in particular notes that Cuba (unlike all others) was set up after destalinization in the USSR, and for that reason has some "exceptional" features. I would add that the large scale departure of dissidents to the US reduced the level of internal repression (exit instead of gulag); and that the "heroic" structure of revolutionary charisma was kept alive both by the guerrilla generation, and by the siege effects of US sanctions.

almost every front. Some of these were medium to long term; some international and security-related; some domestic (notably concerning the acute dysfunctions of the economic system); some simply related to the management of the transition from old verticalist structures to more normalized and regulated governance practices. By the spring of 2020 all these were dominated by a much more immediate and urgent - perhaps existential – crisis, partly due to Covid-19, but also to international setbacks that accentuate long-run negative policy legacies. It is in this extremely difficult overall setting that we need to situate the much narrower theme of this paper – governance challenges in the social policy sector. What follows cannot attempt a comprehensive overview of all the policy issues facing the new government. But it would be extremely artificial and misleading to isolate particular sectoral challenges from their encompassing context. The seven headings that follow cover most of the difficulties besetting Cuban social policy choices (and that is how they will be illustrated). But they all obviously extend to wider domains as well. They are

a) Command and Control

As noted, the CCP remains the leading force in Cuban society and the State, and it has a six decade track record of intrusive (often proudly arbitrary) command and control (Whitehead, 2016). At times of extreme national emergency- such as the present- there can be a plausible rationale for stressing capacity for decisive top-down leadership, but the burden of the 2018 reforms were that this approach to governance had been pressed beyond its limits, (notably delivering disappointing results in terms of consumption levels and food production). The hope and intention was that a more professionalized and rational strategy of governance (perhaps along the lines that had served the Chinese CP so well over the post-Mao period) could support some much-needed "rectifications" or "course corrections". At the same time, it remained essential for the people to understand that top-down authority and national unity in the face of foreign danger were still not to be questioned. The "Leninist" mechanics of the constitutional review process and the plebiscite, and the stately progress of the transfer of authority, were designed to leave no doubt on that score.

At the time of writing all the signs are that the President and the First Secretary are managing to collaborate effectively, and that the structures of top-down control are working intact and not gridlocked. One of the paradoxical consequences of Washington's use of extreme and punitive sanctions against the regimes it selects for "coercive regime change" is that this proves counterproductive because it promotes a strong closing of ranks. Certainly, in the Cuban case, any space for critical reflection or liberalization is liable to be shut down during the current emergency. And, indeed, if the top priority is to contain the Covid virus, a well-focused and scientifically-based command and control response is likely to save lives as compared to the demagogy and medical irresponsibility on display in some of the world's leading democracies.

Nevertheless, in the slightly longer term Cuba's social policy matrix will require far more debate, including openness to critical viewpoints and alternative models. Blind loyalty and patriotic discipline are wasting assets where complex trade-offs and deep structural adjustments are concerned. Even if the old reflexes of mass solidarity and revolutionary mobilization can be made to work against the pandemic (which remains to be seen), command and control will not fix the transport system, or make the housing stock safe, or provide food security for all- not at least unless it can be informed by honest self-criticism, and upgraded by new thinking.[12] Here is the first fundamental social policy challenge of the 2020s.

12. "It is only in the initial stages and so long as the charismatic leader acts in a way which is completely outside everyday social organization, that it is possible for his followers to live communistically in a community of faith and enthusiasm, on gifts, 'booty' or sporadic acquisition…The great majority of disciples and followers will in the long run 'make their living' out of their 'calling' in a material sense as well. Indeed, this must be the case if the movement is not to disintegrate…For charisma to be transformed into a permanent routine structure, it is necessary that its anti-economic character should be altered. It must be adapted to some form of fiscal organization to provide for the needs of the group… As a rule the process of routinization is not free of conflict…" Thus, wrote Max Weber on the "routinization of charisma" in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Weber, 1947: 367/70). Then on pp 386ff he went on to consider the transformation of charisma in an anti-authoritarian direction (towards authority based on meeting public expectations), in accordance with what has since become known as "performance legitimacy".

b) Rationing

The general point can be amplified by reference to the deep failings of the inherited structure of state-directed economic allocations. As already noted, it should be possible to separate this policy issue from the more political question of regime type. Other communist party ruled states have come to recognize the dysfunctions of the command economy.[13] Cuba itself has been forced to pull back from the cradle to grave system it had pursued so long as Soviet subsidies were available. But such retreats have been reluctant and inadequate. A coherent embrace of market allocation mechanisms has yet to take place.

Cuba's dual currency system is at the core of the problem, and experts have talked about the need to replace it for a generation. Still it remains in place, with the result that however much command the policymakers arrogate to themselves they lack the basic signals they need to detect the pinch-points of resource scarcity, and therefore to reallocate limited inputs to where they are most needed. The crucial governance point here is that a distinction can be made between using price signals to allocate resources efficiently, and "neo-liberal" dogmas that prevent attending to collective social needs, and that bestow windfall gains on private speculators.

Some kind of rationing is inherent in the idea of universal healthcare, free at the point of delivery, or free education for all, or the provision of a *canasta básica*. Such social policies meet demonstrable needs (especially when US sanctions are tightened and the pandemic threatens all), and provide the elements of a vital 'social pact' between the state and the people that the authorities are bound to preserve at almost any cost. But if the economy is compartmentalized into a peso market for the masses characterized by severe scarcity, and a CUC market with more abundant provision for the minority with access to foreign exchange, and a profound imbalance between the two (as in 25 pesos = 1 CUC), arbitrage and diversion of resources between the two segments can nullify the apparent benefits of the formal rationing system. To take a simple example, if aspirin and soap can be sold for CUC then the public health system will not be able to retain an affordable supply of aspirin for the use of its clients. On a broader canvas, it becomes impossible to measure which economic activities are socially profitable, or in fact generate negative added value, when company (and even many household) accounts require the aggregation of both currency flows.[14]

There is a reason why this apparently straightforward accounting error has not proved amenable to reform. The official argument is that foreign exchange is not available to bridge the gap between the two systems, and that is of course a problem- especially now. But the underlying governance problem is deeper than that. If doctors and teachers were to be remunerated at something closer to their social worth, the magnificent supply of medical personnel, and the admirable teacher-student ratios, would be harder to sustain, as it would become clear how much other sectors of the economy were being drained to finance these social programs. As it stands not even the most powerful ministers at the apex of the decision tree have accurate information about what their choices are really costing, so decisions may well be taken on doctrinal and even "moral" grounds rather than with clarity about their system-wide effects.[15] The key point here is that if Díaz-Canel is to have the policy tools needed to achieve the UN's SDGs within a decade, better signaling about resource bottlenecks will be essential.

c) Collective Responsibility

For the first six decades after the Revolution Cuba's core concept of political leadership was the *comandante.* As the term clearly indicates, the ruler's function was to issue commands, albeit after gathering collective opinions and expert advice according to the matter in hand. The ascent of Díaz-

13. See Jowitt op. cit. pp 131/4 on the political structure of the Soviet command economy. A classic statement on the economic aspects is Kornai, 1992.
14. For example, when I made impressionistic enquiries in 2018 about how much it would cost to repair of a restaurant in Old Havana the results were grotesquely expensive, since even readily available local provisions were being charged as if imported. This illustrated to me why investments that might be socially productive would not be considered financially viable.
15. The *reductio ad absurdum* this procedure should have been apparent fifty years ago, when the *zafra* of Ten Million Tons wrecked much of the rest of the economy, and therefore rendered the sugar harvest target itself unattainable because its essential inputs were disorganized. Entry into Comecon was supposed to protect Moscow from further wastefulness on this scale.

Canel is supposed to inaugurate not only a new generation of leaders, but also a more collaborative and shared approach to the responsibilities of policy formation and implementation. At least in theory there should now be a switch towards more "collective responsibility". Ministers serving a President and other officers who are constrained by term limits can sometimes risk standing out for a proposal, with the calculation that if it proves successful the originator will get the credit, and may even get improved prospects for future promotion. Under the previous system it was unwise to claim credit where the *comandante* might feel sidelined, and holding out against the consensus was a career destroying strategy.

Only time will tell whether the 2018 reforms do indeed inaugurate such a shift in leadership styles. The CCP will be inclined to continue to operate on Leninist principles, probably even after Díaz-Canel replaces Raúl, and as an institution the Cuban Armed Forces are unlikely to embrace too much innovation (although there could be a subsection with business experience who might aspire eventually to break loose). While both these power blocs could well accept a further shift towards greater emphasis on efficiency and results, they are unlikely to look favorably on mavericks and dissenters.

If so, a further governance challenge in the social policy area will be to build enough momentum around any proposal involving deep innovation. In many Latin American nations this obstacle can be circumnavigated by those with sufficiently high status foreign educational qualifications, and/or the backing of specialized agencies like the WB and the IDB. Upper class connections and private sector lobbying also play their role. None of these aids to innovation are likely to be effective in the Cuban context. Perhaps good contacts with China or Russia (or business operations in Panama) might help a bit -especially in areas like transport where foreign funding and expertise can make can make the difference, but in general policy reformers will have to build domestic support coalitions and/or rely on traditional top-down methods of operation. Will this be enough to address the challenges of food security, or unemployment? Can the technocrats in the central bank persuade the cabinet to do what is necessary on exchange rate reform or fiscal rationality? To achieve a lasting improvement of economic performance the whole of the government would need to buy into an agreed formula, and then sell it to the populace, risking their now limited political capital.

d) Transparency

Throughout the world both democratic and autocratic governments are finding that lack of citizen trust has become a major challenge to effective governance, both in general and in the social policy area. The Xi government is struggling to regain ground after its disastrous mishandling of the first phase of the Covid outbreak in Wuhan. In Chile the Pinera administration (despite its clear electoral mandate) was almost overwhelmed by the protests it provoked when public transport fares were raised. The *gilets jaunes* have cornered Macron – and further examples abound. So a key policy challenge for Díaz-Canel is so to manage public communications and popular expectations as to retain the authority needed for effective governance. Such issues are conventionally analysed under the rubric of 'transparency'.

This is not an easy topic to discuss objectively when it comes to Cuba. Solid evidence is hard to come by, and polemics quickly intervene. I can, however, report a succession of personal anecdotes that illustrate the challenges involved. First, I was travelling in Cuba just after the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. For several days as the news came through and no official guidance was given, various informants expressed their solidarity with a small socialist country subjected to bullying by a Great Power. Then, when the *maximo lider* eventually came out strongly on the side of Moscow, those who had guessed wrong hastened to cover up their mistake. Twenty tears later I was in Matanzas when the Berlin Wall came down. The news spread like wildfire. Everyone, whatever their political inclinations, knew that this was a profound moment of dislocation for the Cuban Revolution. But for about a week no official recognition of the facts emerged. It took the CCP that long to prime all its activists on the new party line, which was then imparted word for word to the population at large, as if they were hearing it for the first time. During the 'special period' I witnessed further examples of the disjunction between instant popular intelligence and the much slower formulation of a carefully orchestrated official discourse. By the time of my last visit to Havana, ordinary people would speak frankly about the situation in Venezuela and what it portended for them. In an official event I was alone in explaining that the Europeans who had broken with Maduro were not simply US stooges. The Venezuelan leader was,

I said, "impresentable" to European progressive opinion. My statement was greeted with united disapproval- so long as the formal event continued. However in the subsequent lunch it was clear that I was not actually the pariah after all, as everyone really knew that what I had said needed to be considered. Criticizing Trump in a meeting of Republic Senators would invite similar (or harsher) responses.

With those antecedents in mind, what might we expect from the Díaz-Canel government's communications strategy (in particular on social policy issues)? My sense is that *Granma* and related official outlets have become somewhat more candid since he took office. On paper the current Constitution commits to considerable press freedom (articles 53 and 60), and more accurate reporting may also have been encouraged in part to contrast with Trump's tweeting, and perhaps also because they believe they have a good case to make, and may even sense that the people are with them. At the same time, they face more competition from domestic social media, so if they are to get a hearing they need to upgrade the honesty of their coverage. It remains clear that only some topics can be treated transparently- other key issues remain out of bounds, as the vote on the Constitutional reforms made clear.

Still, various of the social policy issues outlined above are now receiving fuller and more informative treatment.[16] There is scope for a partial and provisional expansion of collective deliberation, aimed at taking an educated and concerned citizenry more into account and thus bolstering confidence in the new team. The ignorance and prejudice of much foreign commentary on Cuba (notably in the United States) helps support official messaging. This is by no means sufficient to promote "full transparency", and it may at any point be subject to retraction. But if the Cuban people are to maintain their discipline and morale in the hard times that lie ahead, it makes sense for the current authorities to reach out to them with honest explanations, where they can.

There is, however, one particularly sensitive social policy area where the disjunction between what the authorities say and what the people experience is particularly intractable, namely-

e) Equity

The domestic and international prestige of the Cuban Revolution arises essentially because of its claim to offer full and genuine social equality (not just social democratic social inclusiveness). For the first thirty years this was sustained through massive financial support from the Soviet bloc, but the promise has also been kept alive for a further three decades when external assistance was smaller and more unreliable. Throughout all these six decades the Cuban example has been fiercely criticized, implacably opposed, and subjected to tight unilateral US sanctions, backed by a highly motivated focus of opposition centred in Miami that denies the validity of the Cuban model and works tirelessly to overturn it.[17]

So the core social policy challenge for the Díaz-Canel administration is to make the Cuban model sustainable in the face of US hostility, while preserving and reinforcing those aspects of the historical equity agenda that can be maintained over the longer run. Gini coefficients on income distribution are hard to compute given the dual currency issue, but on any plausible basis there must be major (and probably growing) inequalities in this crucial area.

Looking at social equity more broadly, as Cuban policymakers prefer, the UN's SDGs for 2030 provide a non-partisan yardstick. In addition to the objectives discussed above, goal five concerns gender equality, goal ten addresses the special needs of marginalized and handicapped minorities, and goal sixteen calls for strong institutions to secure justice and human rights for all. As can be seen the full UN equity agenda is extremely ambitious, and barely achieved anywhere (Scandinavia may be the closest). Certainly there are major shortfalls throughout the western hemisphere (Canada may be the

16. A proper assessment would need to consider Cuban television, local radio, exchanges between island residents and their families abroad, and perhaps even (at the margins) Radio and TV Marti.
17. Deciphering the real agenda of the "Cuba lobby" in Miami is not straightforward, however. Intransigents have been subject to generational change both in Cuba and Florida, and since 1989 it has become more common for Cuban-Americans to distinguish between the legitimate interests and welfare of the island's population and their still uniformly detested regime. But on the other hand, since Trump took office the most hardline Miami *revanchistes* seem to have regained some of their former ascendancy.

outlier here). Cuba has stronger foundations and better performance than most of its neighbors, but its achievements are at risk and its equity shortfalls remain considerable.

On gender equality the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* has a strong presence, 42.6% of the 2015 labor force was female, as were 48.9% of the members of the National Assembly, and 8 out of ten public prosecutors. There is close to parity in university enrolments. The revised 2018 constitution specifically includes a bar on discrimination based on gender identity. However, the upper reaches of the power structure are still heavily male dominated, and most Cuban women struggle with the 'doble jornada' – combining heavy domestic duties with full-time employment (good evidence about domestic and sexual violence is hard to come by, but see UN Women).

Cuba was slower to move on *discapacitados* (an estimated 360,000), and although they are now receiving more attention there is much to be done – e.g. in terms of mobility and wheelchair access. Concerning ethnic differences, the issue of racial equality remains highly sensitive and generally under-researched (Hansing & Hoffmann, op. cit. provide a valuable exception), and there are also questions to address concerning Chinese, Jewish, and various other religious communities. Still, in comparative terms, Cuba could be considered rather well-placed to meet these aspects of the UN agenda within a decade.

Goal 16 is more hotly disputed- to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies…provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels". Some observers (while mostly silent about the legal black hole and use of torture that characterizes the US base of Guantanamo) assert that Cuban justice is a sham.

The following headline is a recent (fairly representative) example: "Cuba con 90,000 presos, es la mayor carcel del mundo" (Gaviña, 2020). This Spanish journalist was interviewing Edel Gonzalez, who had served as a prosecutor in Cuba for 17 years, and was "expresidente del Poder Judicial en Cuba y Reserva Especial para la dirección del Tribunal Supremo de Cuba". Gonzalez was sponsored by the NGO *Prisoners Defenders* and numerous euro-deputies. In the interview he publicly regretted some unfair judgments that he had handed down. However, his detailed insider account in no way corroborates the heated rhetoric used by his interviewer. He accepted that there were 126 political prisoners, and that (despite the *habeas corpus* provision in article 96 of the current constitution) the machinery for them to clear their names was still lacking. At least some had been prosecuted as a result of the excessive vehemence of (mostly provincial) state security officials, who might also intimidate judges that queried their methods. So he denounced a "climate of fear" preventing fair access to the justice promised by the constitution. On the other hand he also stated that Raúl Castro had issued instructions to all the country's judges not to fear or be swayed by the Ministry of Interior, and he considered that "la nueva Constitución da pie para que se produzca una serie de normas juridicas que tiendan a elevar la libertad de los cubanos" (Gaviña, 2020).

By western hemisphere standards it is far from clear that Cuba is a laggard in meeting Goal 16 standards. On the downside it still lacks any real separation of powers (the Party still rules), but there are some small *bufetes* of independent lawyers that have occasionally succeeded in winning cases against regime zealots (under the Civil Code)[18] and more generally Cuba also lacks the criminal violence, and extra-judicial killings that so cruelly negate the paper "justice systems" in other republics.

As already noted the most fundamental aspect of inequality concerns the distribution of income and wealth. As discussed in section II above (sections on employment and rationing) the key problem concerning the distribution of income is the acutely inequitable dual currency system. If that is still not phased out soon the Díaz-Canel administration will be unable to persuade the people of Cuba that it has taken income inequality seriously.

The distribution of wealth is a related challenge, difficult to sum up in a few lines (for more see Hansing & Hoffmann, 2020). In the absence of proper capital, credit, and real estate markets the scope for

18. As recorded by one of them, Samuel Alipizar, of *Cuba Demanda* (which seeks to develop legal rights on the island by activating existing laws). See his contribution to the Vaclav Havel Center's May 19 webinar from Florida International University on Reforming the Cuban Legal System (Florida International University, 2020).

private wealth accumulation by residents of the island is extremely inhibited, despite the shift towards legalizing more personal property ownership. It can be argued that when markets are lacking those with access to state power are true "rich", but ethnographic work on the Cuban elite would be needed to document the point, and the evidence to hand does not suggest they live in unrestrained opulence. Some both public and private individuals can hold dollar accounts abroad, and there are writers, artists, musicians, and others who enjoy privileged lifestyles because of the foreign exchange at their disposal. By the standards of wealth concentration in the whole of the rest of the western hemisphere it is hard to view such inequities as excessive (except perhaps by the idealistic standards of socialist theory). Where wealth is obtained by illegal means the Cuban system is better than most in offering a corrective.

Overall, then, Cuba faces some serious (and distinctive) challenges in controlling inequalities and convincing the people that the resources available are being distributed equitably. This aspect of the SDG agenda is tough to deliver. Still, only those who have cracked the problem elsewhere are in a good position to criticize Cuba in this regard, and the option exists for the existing system to build on its partial achievements and thereby retain its domestic and external prestige as a pioneer.

f) External Blockade

SDG 17 calls for international co-operation, and the promotion of "meaningful trade liberalization" by 2030 to support the cause of sustainable development around the world. US unilateral trade and investment sanctions against Cuba have been in place since the Kennedy administration, and were 'codified' by the Helms-Burton legislation signed into law by Clinton in 1996. Although only US citizens and businesses are directly subject to this law, it has been extended through extra-territorial enforcement, notably throughout the EU despite objections from Brussels. Havana has consistently resisted these sanctions, and claims vast sums in compensation for the damages they have done, but for now they are tighter than ever and the Díaz-Canel administration must govern on the assumption that they will remain in place for some time to come. Cuban authorities always explain the hardships faced by their citizens as the product of US aggression and revanchism, and while that argument seemed to be losing its potency during the second term of the Obama administration, it is impossible to deny under Trump. If SDG 17 is to make progress it will be despite Washington rather than through its initiative.

Although the so-called "blockade" poses great economic difficulties for Havana it also produces some countervailing advantages. The first is in consolidating internal support around a "siege mentality" patriotic reflex. The second is that it can attract some compensating assistance from non-western countries that dislike the display of US unilateralism, and that may fear the application of similar sanctions against their own interests. In the recent past Venezuela was the leading ally, but China, Russia, and to a lesser extent Iran are also possible sources of help. Even Canada, Mexico and Spain, while wary of offending the US and ambivalent about Cuban communism, can offer some limited relief.

If the Díaz-Canel administration can hold on and make a little progress towards SDG goal fulfillment these offsets to US hostility may gain momentum. There is a severe governance challenge here, but one that Havana is well prepared to manage. The really difficult challenge is the last, namely –

g) Internal Inertia

All the social policy dilemmas and governance challenges outlined in the two previous sections are both grave and interconnected. But they are not necessarily insurmountable. The crucial factor that will determine whether they can be overcome is the energy, focus, and commitment of the Cuban people as a whole. In other words, however problematic the international blockade may be, the variable that could empower Havana to press forward regardless, and even to turn the island into an exemplary case of SDG fulfillment, is essentially internal –to overcome domestic resistance and inertia, and to align the hopes and expectations of the populace with the plans and priorities of their government.

Although in the early years of the Revolution it may have been possible to achieve popular enthusiasm and mass mobilization, that faith and goodwill ran out at least a generation ago. Some of the

most capable and creative people have emigrated. Of those who stayed on the island a considerable degree of sacrifice was found to have been wasted on unsuccessful and incomplete projects. After a while most became skeptical and turned inward, seeking to "resolver" personal problems rather than to perform as heroic guerrillas, or even "new men". The present youth generation is particularly likely to be disengaged from official projects. Well-articulated internal opposition is very much a minority sport, but voluntary labor is more so. Two of the three components of Fukuyama's current recipe for national success are still very much in evidence- order and identity. But the third–trust-will need to be earned all over again. Otherwise the new administration will find that it is just talking to itself, pulling bureaucratic levers without adequate response. This issue is urgent, but it is not necessarily beyond redress. The community solidarity and collective intelligence elicited by the Covid emergency suggest that a fund of popular support still runs latent through the society. The test will be whether it can be enlisted in the cause of sober administration instead of in pursuit of utopian hopes.

It is not only popular skepticism that feeds domestic inertia. Another equally problematic source of unresponsiveness comes from within the prevailing power structure. An enormous amount of consultation and persuasion was required to secure institutional endorsement first of the "actualización" measures, and then of the modest constitutional reform. Veto groups with precarious advantages require a lot of convincing to embark on even incremental improvements that might jeopardize their small gains. Thus, for example, the *plan de auto-suficiencia alimentaria* has been under review for a decade, but food security remains an always postponed aspiration. Beyond managing low-level trade-offs, there is also the challenge of conciliating anxious true believers in the old faith, and touchy hardliners. Each of these obstacles can in principle be managed by a skilled and patient political elite, but the cumulative effect of too many of them at the same time can be to induce inertia, especially when the handover from the old to the new is still underway, and a coherent vision of a better future is unformulated. Here too the problems are urgent, but not necessarily hopeless. More trust, more "democratic legitimacy" of some kind (in accordance with Cuban traditions, not simply an import from the North) could help to break the impasse.

IV CONTEMORARY CUBAN GOVERNANCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Jair Bolsonaro (the democratically elected President of Brazil) is straining every sinew to ensure that his nation's policy path deviates as much as humanly possible from the UN's SDGs. Donald Trump (democratically elected leader of the USA and thus the Free World) not only pursues the same priorities- he also aims to dismantle whatever international organizations he can defund in order to ensure that his country cannot be entangled in any such commitments. To a lesser extent similar points apply to most of the other democracies in the western hemisphere.

Miguel Díaz-Canel became President of Cuba by designation rather than a competitive popular election. He rose through the ranks of Cuba's monopoly party through competence and loyal service. It has charged him with stabilizing the country at a time of great stress, and ideally of setting the stage for a new period of recovery and innovation, while preserving the essentials of the Revolutionary inheritance. If he is to gain trust and legitimacy it will be through "performance" rather than "proceduralism"(Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017) (albeit that the absence of any apparently viable alternative might also work in his favor). The island's social policies need to perform well if he is to succeed. By delivering on the UN's SDGs his administration might both build domestic support and reinforce Cuba's external prestige by comparison with its largest American neighbors. Indeed, they provide an internationally approved and nationally desirable package (or even "vision") that meshes well with the strong social legacy of the Revolution[19], and that could appeal to most of the inhabitants of the island.

19. One more or less objective indicator of the positive nature of this legacy comes from the UN's "Human Development Index". According to this source, in 2019 Cuba's rating on human development, adjusted for per capita income, was the highest in the world. To be more precise, ranked by the HDI index Cuba was located 43 countries higher than its (low) income level would predict. The next best performer was Georgia (the Caucasus republic, not the US state, obviously) ranked 34 countries above its per capita income. By contrast some oil exporters, were far below their expected HDI levels, as rentier states neglected the social welfare of their subjects (Equatorial Guinea was 80 positions behind, Kuwait 52, Qatar 40).
Returning to Cuba, this exceptional HDI ranking can be viewed two ways. It shows how much priority the regime has devoted to social policy. But it also shows how poor its economic performance has been.

Although Havana's social policies can be assessed and improved one by one, it makes more sense to evaluate them as an integral package. In fact, they could also be understood as a manifestation of what the Cuban Revolution as a whole has been seeking to accomplish. Since the original goal of building a 'communist society' is no longer so clearly in play[20], and yet the fruits of that costly endeavor are on display and to be appreciated and protected (not least by the people of Cuba who undertook such sacrifices to establish them), the survival and success of the Díaz-Canel administration will be closely entangled with its performance in the social policy domain. Potentially the opportunity exists for the next generation of leaders in Havana to reinvigorate their mandate, win recognition from their neighbors, and regain the enthusiasm of their citizens, by making the SDGs the focus of their efforts. It would make a good start if- in stark contrast to the choices being made by Bolsonaro and Trump- Havana proved capable of overcoming the Covid-19 challenge at home, and then went on to play a constructive role in tackling it abroad as well. Cuba's healthcare investments provide a solid foundation for such an endeavor, but – as this article has stressed throughout – no single social policy success can be treated in isolation from the rest. So even if Havana's management of the pandemic does prove a model[21] issues of food security, housing quality, poor transport and badly remunerated employment must also be taken into account. As we have seen above, there is a case to be made in favor of the island's social policies on all of these fronts, but in all these areas promising experiments are in need of substantial correction and revision. The SDG framework provides both an acknowledgement of Cuba's potential and a spur to much further social innovation and upgrading.

This is a possibility, but it is highly challenging. The governance of Cuba is not yet fit for this purpose. Indeed it could be dismissed as yet another utopian ambition no more plausible than its 'communist society' predecessor. Certainly major changes would be needed to give it a chance. Even with the best of efforts and intentions it could be that "brute material realities" will guarantee its failure. But Díaz-Canel's administration might also gain purpose and cohesion by pursuing a strong social policy agenda in the face of formidable difficulties. This could build on the unusual merits of the Revolution's social legacies, while also appealing to the national pride, and indeed the heroic traditions, that have sustained it for so long. At any rate, it is hard to picture another strategy that can give the present incumbents direction and a plausible claim on the allegiance of their citizens. Simply improvising from day to day will hardly suffice, given the existential challenges in play. Since the SDGs, like the 2018 constitutional amendments, envision strong institutional structures and a more responsive and accountable system of decision-making, such a program might also overcome some of the disconnection between the Cuban people and their rulers (Cassini, 2017).

Two decades ago I posed the following hypothetical question: "If the citizens of Cuba, relatively isolated from their neighbours, were to deliberate and conclude that their one-party communist form of government was democratic, would we (*i.e. democratization scholars)* be required to allow that adjudication to over-ride more conventional external judgements and definitions?" (Whitehead, 2002: 23). This was a theoretical exercise, to probe "hard cases" in which popular consent might freely be given to a non-standard regime claiming democratic legitimacy. My conclusion was that under such conditions, since democracy is a social construct, the national verdict should merit tentative scholarly respect - but with stringent conditions. The Cuban people would need their freedom to deliberate freely (constitutional rights as in UN documents) including the airing of alternative viewpoints and the absence of any kind of intimidation. They would also need assurance that future generations would retain the option to reopen the issue. Assuming that the island retains its national independence, and that most islanders wish to preserve most of what their Revolution has accomplished, then this is the only peaceful route to its further democratization. As outlined in the "governance" section of this paper, my old theoretical exercise remains on the table. Taken together the revised Constitution, the generational transition, the shift towards independent social media, the slow easing of state economic controls, and an understandable pride in Cuba's social policy achievements, all contribute towards a possible pathway of slow, cautious, and consensual political evolution.

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20. Article 7 of the 2018 Constitution still characterizes the "orientation" of the Communist Party as "esfuerzos communes en la constucción del socialismo y el avance hacia la sociedad comunista". But the revised charter enhances the authority of the Cuban State, and article 13 a) limits the State's mission to the construction of socialism.
21. Not yet an established fact – and in any case other Latin American republics with more conventional systems of governance, such as Costa Rica and Uruguay, are also performing well so far.

Consider how else history might judge the post-revolutionary generation. If they fail to find a viable path forward comparative experience indicates what else is possible. Alexei Yurchak's vivid description of the last years of the USSR (Yurchak, 2005) could still become an alternative future for Cuba: "At the moment of collapse it suddenly became obvious that Soviet life had always seemed simultaneously eternal and stagnating, vigorous and ailing, bleak and full of promise. Although these characteristics may appear mutually exclusive, in fact they were mutually constitutive."[22] If history is to "absolve" Díaz-Canel and the CCP from such a verdict they will need an attractive and unifying project, and reinvigorated social policy could provide their best option.

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22. Or, as in Alexander Wendt's (2015) social ontology they were in "superposition", (like Schrodinger's cat, both dead and alive until their moment of reckoning).

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El "Foro Europa-Cuba" es una iniciativa nacida en 2017 compuesta por un consorcio de once instituciones líderes que comparten una consolidada experiencia en investigación sobre asuntos cubanos y las relaciones entre Europa y Cuba, con coordinación del CIDOB, Barcelona. La creación de la Red Jean Monnet Foro Europa-Cuba, co-financiada por el programa Erasmus+ de la Unión Europea, permitirá analizar los procesos de reforma económica, política, social e institucional en curso en la isla, tan necesarios para su mejor inserción global, regional e interregional. http://www.foroeuropacuba.org/

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