

It is Time to Bring 50 years of Experience Building Lasting Partnerships to Cuba and the United States

Synopsis

In April 2015, Cuba joined its democratic neighbors in the Western Hemisphere for the first time at the Summit of the Americas in Panama. Now is the time to build and strengthen partnerships that will fortify the relationship between the United States and Cuba. Partners of the Americas (Partners) has been developing human and social capital throughout Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) since 1964 through a people to people approach that connects citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), universities, businesses, and governments across borders to serve and to change lives through lasting partnerships. Partners believes that there are three key thematic areas of mutual interest to both the Cuban and U.S. governments that can serve as mechanisms to open the door to more fruitful engagement between people, institutions, and organizations of both countries through partnerships and citizen exchanges: **Youth and Sports, Higher Education, and Agriculture**. Imagine a re-born U.S./Cuba relationship punctuated by early adopted programs centered on these areas of mutual interest and supported by an organization that has lived these values in good times and in bad with nearly every country in the Western Hemisphere since the embargo began.

Youth and Sports

For the past 50 years, Partners has engaged nearly 10,000 youth and adults who work with youth from over 20 LAC countries. Partners has implemented youth leadership programs including the Youth Ambassadors and American Youth Leadership Programs funded by the U.S. Department of State (DOS) and the YouthLead Program funded by the Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA), Colombia's national network of vocational schools. Partners' youth programs prepare young leaders to become responsible citizens and contributing members of their communities; positively influencing the attitudes of a new generation and fostering relationships among youth from different ethnic, religious, and national groups. Based on this rich experience, Partners developed its own youth leadership curriculum in 2014 entitled YouthLead that empowers youth by engaging them in extended and cross-cultural projects that allow them to dive deeply into real world issues, explore from multiple perspectives, and take action by implementing solutions within their own communities. In addition, Partners has worked with over 14,000 youth in Latin America and the Caribbean through the A Ganar program, which helps youth take charge of their life and obtain employment through the development of key employability skills, vocational training, and internship opportunities.

Partners also has successful experience facilitating sports exchanges that build mutual understanding between coaches, administrators, and youth leaders. Throughout history, sport has been a powerful tool for promoting and reflecting social change. Sport has played an integral role in building racial inclusion, increasing gender equality, and reducing political conflict. For the past 25 years, Partners has implemented sport-for-development programs in over 20 countries including politically challenging environments. Since 2006, Partners has implemented DOS-funded exchanges, including the Triple Play Baseball Exchange, the Youth Sports Management Exchange, and the Sport, Culture, and Society Exchange that brought coaches, players, and press from countries such as Venezuela and Nicaragua to the U.S. to share ideas regarding the role of baseball and other team sports in their communities. Participants also exchanged best practices

and methodologies on the interconnected benefits of volunteerism and youth sports. At no better time than now can the power of sport—specifically baseball—be leveraged to transcend perceived prejudices and allow participants from the sports field to become catalysts for social change in their communities in both Cuba and the U.S.

Higher Education

There is a direct correlation between Cuba’s long standing position on the importance of inclusive education and Partner’s leadership in promoting educational opportunities through higher education exchanges. Partners believes that education is critical to fostering economic and workforce development in the Western Hemisphere.

The skills that students need when they graduate are changing, and the increasingly interconnected economies of the Americas require workers who can prosper in a globalized world. Education and student mobility are key to preparing this workforce, and the LAC region is lagging other regions in higher educational collaboration. Study abroad is essential to enhancing job prospects in the 21st century.

Since 2012, Partners has been the founding lead organization in President Obama’s signature educational initiative in the Western Hemisphere—100,000 Strong in the Americas—in partnership with the DOS and NAFSA: Association of International Educators. This program awards small grants to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that demonstrate the greatest commitment and innovation toward increasing study abroad between the United States and countries throughout the Western Hemisphere. To date, Partners has created an “innovation network” of over 1,500 HEIs throughout the Americas that are able to engage with each other on topics of collaboration and best practices through Partner’s Higher Education platform. With additional support, Partners could facilitate U.S./Cuba specific small grant competitions, allowing thousands of U.S. HEIs to submit their best ideas to increase educational exchange with Cuba in partnership with leading Cuban HEIs; already among the most respected in the hemisphere. The Initiative has already awarded a winning grant to a U.S.-Cuba partnership and will be awarding more soon.

Agriculture

Agriculture has historically served as a vehicle to promote cooperation and exchange ideas. The recent policy changes announced by President Obama will allow for greater engagement with Cuba through agricultural exchanges that are beneficial to both countries. Cuba’s depleted agricultural sector matched with Partner’s network of volunteer agricultural experts lends itself to significant impacts through volunteer led technical assistance. For the past 23 years, Partners has implemented the USAID funded Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) Program in 30 countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Through exchanges, Partners provides technical assistance to farmers, cooperatives, agribusinesses, extension services, government agencies, and other institutions. Partners promotes broad-based participation in economic growth and increased food security by engaging an expansive network of specialized volunteers, development experts, and local leaders to provide targeted technical assistance up and down the value chain. Partners has engaged 30 countries and fielded nearly 2,000 short-term volunteer agricultural experts on assignments that have trained over 120,000 people.