

Book Review

– *Healthcare without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism*, by John M. Kirk, University Press of Florida, 2015.

This book is an outstanding study about Cuba's medical assistance abroad or, as they officially call it, 'medical internationalism'. Cuba, a tiny country of eleven million inhabitants, was a significant player in the international political arena in the 1960s to the 1980s. Its reputation was built on their support to revolutionary and national liberation movements in Africa (with strong military presence) and Latin America and the Caribbean (providing training and assistance to guerrilla movements). It is less known that Cuba, beginning in the early sixties and intensifying this mission until the present, also is an innovative and significant provider of medical assistance to the Global South.

Kirk rightly remarks that 'the contribution of this small island to global health dwarfs all that of all other industrialized countries' (p. 6). In March 2014 some 50,000 Cuban medical professionals worked in over 60 developing countries. In the mid-eighties the United State sent abroad one development employee per 34,700 U.S. citizens and Cuba one civilian co-operant for every 625 Cubans (p. 17).

His book opens with a chapter about the history and range of Cuba's medical assistance, both providing immediate relief by incoming 'medical brigades' of professionals living in the same miserable neighbourhoods as the underprivileged slum dwellers or rural poor, and training local students (in Cuba or in situ) up to Cuban standards.

There are ten thematic chapters. Chapter 2 is the story of the beginning and expansion of the ELAM, the Cuban Medical University for international cooperation (Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas), originally founded for the Latin American and the Caribbean region (it started in 1999 after Hurricane George and Mitch of the previous year had devastated large parts of Central America and Haiti). In the following years it received students from all continents; as of January 2014 it had 11,000 students from 123 countries.

Meanwhile, in several other Latin American, African and Asian countries, ELAM replicas were established. Rich countries like Brazil and Venezuela pay for the Cuban medical brigades (Cuba's foreign currency income for medical assistance is three times more than what is generated by tourists visiting the

island). Low-income or extremely poor countries receive this kind of aid without financial obligations.

Other chapters refer to immediate disaster responses, like in the case of Haiti and El Salvador, or other long-term missions to the South Pacific. Two entire chapters are dedicated to Cuba's medical relations with Venezuela after the special bond between the two countries in 1998, and to the comprehensive medical assistance programmes to the handicapped in the ALBA countries (ALBA encompassed Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and six smaller Caribbean island-states).

There is an interesting chapter about Cuba's biotechnology, expertise developed notwithstanding the American economic embargo and exported to poor countries without major costs and patented in several industrialized countries. I would also like to mention the two moving chapters about Operation Milagro (assistance to eye diseases), and medical care for the Chernobyl Children. Operation Milagro, originally developed for Venezuelan patients, became a Cuban-Venezuelan medical partnership with Cuban doctors and Venezuelan financing for Latin America and the Global South. Cuba also initiated and still maintains a special programme for the (then) children affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Despite the beginning of the Cuban 'special period' of extreme hardship and food deficiency after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Cuba continued to offer assistance, and the first very sick children arrived in 1990. Cuba continued with this humanitarian aid programme until December 2011, treating approximately 23,000 children from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, a 'symbolic manner of thanking the Soviet Union and its socialist allies for 30 years of support....' (p. 250).

The book is the result long-term investment in research and in-depth knowledge acquired during long periods of participant observation and extensive interviews. Kirk's meticulous analysis is obligatory reading, not only for those interested in Cuba's worldwide medical assistance, but also for anyone who wants to know examples of best practices in international development assistance.

Dirk Kruijt, Utrecht University
D.Kruijt@uu.nl