

Marissa Chavez

It is difficult to sum up the experiences and the depth of understanding that I gained in Cuba on this delegation in a few short paragraphs. However, one of the highlights of this trip for me was getting a glimpse into a society that understands and values the importance of the “collective” well being of its citizens, rather than placing an emphasis on the financial successes of the “individual.” Even more importantly was the integration of the work and role of women in Cuban society and how this added to creating an environment where basic human rights (like healthcare, education, culture, etc.) are given a higher priority than an individual’s right to make money. It seems in the post-revolutionary Cuba women have gained a much stronger voice at the table and, despite an economy that is crippled by the U.S. embargo, they have helped make investments back into their communities a reality.

Nothing exemplified this to me more than when we visited La Guinera and the farmer’s cooperative near Matanzas. Faced with growing poverty, deepening social problems, inadequate housing and a lack of food the Cuban state did not focus on attracting corporations through tax incentives to “help create jobs,” they didn’t bring in multinational corporate banking entities to give out high interest loans to the community and they didn’t give out incentives for the wealthy elite to start privately owned businesses in the hopes that they will re-invest into those communities. They didn’t do this because they understand that these types of investments only help to increase the financial wealth of a few at the costs of many.

Instead, the women from those communities knew they had the best answers to solve their problems. Cuban officials focused on assisting women in those communities, who had taken on these leadership roles, to help provide them with what they needed to accomplish their goals. The women from these communities understood that in order to create a sustainable and equitable future they would have to focus on education, healthcare, local agriculture crops, arts and culture. The women at La Guinera focused on building affordable housing and they have already constructed 9 buildings to help provide that housing. They have also built schools, a community center and a health clinic. The farmers at the cooperative, which is mostly run by women, in Matanzas have created a collective where they can raise their own food to feed their community and create revenue by selling their surplus crops.

These are all key priorities that we know work to advance the collective betterment of everyone in the community. It was refreshing to find a place where there was a strong political will to implement policies that fostered equitable development, rather than a society whose only concern was ensuring that the wealthy can continue to get more wealthy on the backs of most of its citizens.