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Why Cuba has no anti-vaccine movement

By Marc Vandepitte and Toon Danhieux



In the imperialist countries, honest skepticism about government handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the profit-driven decisions of pharmaceutical companies have allowed rightist and ultrarightist groups to mobilize sections of the population behind unscientific theories that harm public health. This article, published in dewereldmorgen.be in early December, lightly edited and updated Dec. 13, examines this phenomenon by comparing the experience of Belgium — part of the imperialist world — with that of socialist Cuba, both countries with about 11 million+ population. Translation: John Catalinotto.

Larger and larger sections of the European population have been openly expressing their distrust of their governments' handling of the coronavirus crisis.

In response, the mainstream political establishment has panicked and reacted in a paternalistic and repressive manner by imposing vaccination on everyone and limiting freedom of movement. This approach has failed to convince skeptics to accept the government's arguments.

To win acceptance would require at least listening to the fears and concerns of the unvaccinated. But there are other factors at play as well. A comparison with Cuba's experience illustrates the problems.

Mistrust of the government

Many unvaccinated people doubt — and with reason — the competence and/or good faith of governments that now want to vaccinate them as quickly as possible. We can understand these doubts. Since March 2020, European countries and even individual regions in Belgium have been improvising their response to COVID-19. Their approach to the pandemic suffers from a lack of consistency and logic. Countries, even those with similar infection rates, have taken very different measures.

The Belgian government won the gold medal of improvisation, waiting until mid-March 2020 before taking action — six weeks too late. Had they acted earlier, the rate of COVID-19 spread would have been much slower, and thousands of deaths could have been avoided.

They still haven't learned from their mistakes. With each new wave of the coronavirus, the response remains too slow.

Although experts have been sounding the alarm for years, the Belgian government was unprepared for a pandemic. At first they said masks were useless, because there were none in stock, due to a lack of adequate management. Then, suddenly, masks became mandatory.

In September 2021, as the numbers of infected grew, Belgium relaxed restrictions. At the same moment, with fewer cases, the Netherlands tightened the rules. Go figure.

In Belgium, when something needs changing, seven health ministers have to agree on it. Governors and mayors simultaneously adopted stricter or more lenient rules, while party

presidents polished their image at the expense of public health. One day the Flemish minister-president asks for more flexible rules for choirs and music groups. The next day he calls for stricter rules.

When this mistrust finds its way to the streets and social media, it hands the far-right a slam dunk, allowing the rightist movement to show empathy with people whose discontent is legitimate to succeed in drawing them into its wake.

The extreme right's goal, of course, is not to demand more democracy for the voiceless. History teaches us that the far-right seeks only to hasten the emergence of an authoritarian regime that will leave these people completely out in the cold. It will protect the dominance of the 1% richest people and take their exploitation of everything and everyone to the extreme.

In any case, the approach to the coronavirus crisis in Belgium was and still is a hot mess. But in fact, the popular distrust runs much deeper than that. During the last major crisis, the banking crisis of 2008, it was also the ordinary people who suffered.

The banks that speculated with the people's money were not prosecuted. They were even rescued when faced with collapse. And it was ordinary people who paid the bill. No more is needed to raise suspicions about the government's management of the COVID-19 crisis.

And Cuba?

Starting January 2020, almost two months before the Belgian government finally woke up, the Cuban government was rolling out a national plan to fight the coronavirus. The government launched massive, popular information campaigns in neighborhoods and on television. Cuban authorities issued consistent directives with no contradictions; there was no need to get seven health ministers to agree, no debates about the obligation to wear a mask.

The government took responsibility and did everything possible to nip the virus in the bud. Instead of making facile promises about so-called sacrosanct freedoms, instead of relaxing measures too quickly for electoral reasons or because of a lack of political courage, it took energetic initiatives.

Some examples: Tourism, the main source of income, but also of contamination, was immediately put on hold. The obligation to wear a mask applied to children from the age of six. When it became clear that schools were also major sources of contamination, home schooling was introduced. School television has been a great help in this regard.

Aïssa Naranjo, a doctor in Havana, explained: “Thanks to a campaign giving correct information about health risks, Cubans have understood the importance of staying at home. They know how disease is transmitted and feel responsible for their own health and that of their families and neighbors.”

Health care in Cuba is primarily preventive and highly decentralized. Each neighborhood has its own polyclinic, and there is a strong bond of trust between the local population and the health workers. Since March 2020, nearly 30,000 “contact tracers” have gone door to door, including in the most remote areas of the island, checking each family to see if any of its members have been infected. University students have been mobilized to participate in the contact tracing.

In Belgium, this search has been carried out by anonymous operators from call centers, an approach which inspires little popular confidence.

Meanwhile, Cuba was working on developing its vaccines against the coronavirus. By March 2021, three vaccines were being tested. Today, Cuba has five vaccines of its own design and production, including one for children as young as two years old.

The policy on COVID-19 is totally different in Cuba than in Belgium. And this was reflected in the statistics. At the end of 2020, Cuba had 146 deaths from COVID. Belgium had nearly 20,000 for the same period.

Then the delta variant arrived, leading to a race against time. Unfortunately Cuban vaccines were not ready until three months after the delta variant appeared.

In Belgium, vaccination was implemented at a rapid pace starting in late 2020, which significantly reduced the number of deaths caused by the delta variant, at least initially.

In Cuba, the peak of delta variant infections occurred in July 2021, causing many deaths and undermining the health care system. This precarious health situation was compounded

by serious economic problems due to the economic blockade imposed by the United States, the halt in tourism and the rise in food prices. This led to great discontent among the population.

From the U.S., some forces tried, via social media, to stir up this anger and channel it into demonstrations targeting the Cuban government. These attempts ultimately failed.

As soon as the vaccination campaign was launched in Cuba, the results were spectacular. On Sept. 20, when the campaign began, there were still more than 40,000 new infections and 69 deaths per day. Today, Cuba has fewer than 80 new infections and one death per day.

Cuban children are also vaccinated from the age of two. As of Dec. 6, some 90% of Cubans had received their first dose. This places the island second only to the United Arab Emirates in terms of vaccination rates. No other country in Latin America has such a high vaccination coverage. In Belgium, it is at 76%.

Distrust of Big Pharma

Many unvaccinated people in Belgium find it suspicious that the government provides free vaccines. All the more so, because other medicines have become more and more expensive. Every year, health care puts more strain on patients' budgets, but suddenly we are all "required" to get vaccinated — for free. What's behind this? If you ask this question, does it make you a conspiracy theorist?

People are well aware that Big Pharma is driven only to maximize profits and cares less about people's safety than it should. For example, between 1940 and 1980 [from 1940 to 1971 in the U.S.], millions of mothers-to-be took DES (diethylstilbestrol) to prevent miscarriage [which DES failed to prevent]. In the 1960s, they were prescribed Softenon [Thalidomide] for nausea during pregnancy. The use of these drugs caused thousands of babies to be born with deformities.

In the United States, Purdue Pharma, owned by the wealthy Sackler family, still marketed the powerful painkiller OxyContin after management knew full well that it was highly addictive. Fentanyl, invented by Paul Janssen of the Belgian pharmaceutical giant of the same name (part of Johnson & Johnson), is also a highly addictive painkiller offered over

the counter [in Belgium – in the U.S., it is legal by prescription only], with plenty of advertising.

Johnson & Johnson has been convicted for its role in this case. In Beerse (in the province of Antwerp), the same pharmaceutical company has been producing a vaccine against COVID since last year.

People know that pharmaceutical companies charge prices for their COVID vaccines that are far too high and are heavily subsidized by the government, but they are nevertheless allowed to pocket their billions in profits. When these companies claim that a booster shot is necessary, it raises suspicions, even if this necessity is scientifically correct.

What about Cuba?

In Cuba, there is no private pharmaceutical industry. All vaccines against the coronavirus are manufactured by state-owned biomedical laboratories. The country produces 80% of all vaccines used in its vaccination campaigns. There are no outrageous prices or excessive profits involved.

As in Belgium, everyone is vaccinated from early childhood against a whole range of diseases. This is one of the main reasons for the very rapid increase in life expectancy in Cuba over the last few decades. Life expectancy in Cuba is now higher than in the United States, and infant mortality is lower. The last few months have proven that COVID vaccines are also very effective. So it's no surprise that Cubans are not only confident, but even proud of their domestic pharmaceutical industry.

Distrust of science

In Belgium, advertising indiscriminately uses real and pseudoscience to sell anything and everything: food supplements, perfect diapers, hair growth serum, high-speed smartphones. As a result, science has lost much of its credibility with many people.

The frequent and large-scale frauds in research only increases this mistrust. A scandal such as dieselgate [Volkswagen automobile company falsified the amount of exhaust emissions] left its mark on people's minds.

Added to this is the fact that many people finish high school or college without understanding statistics or its representation in articles. “There are just as many vaccinated people as there are unvaccinated people in the hospital,” we often hear.

All of this explains the attraction of obscure theories, or at least the fact that people give credence to these theories, because they think “they” are trying to make us believe something. “They” want to muzzle us with their measures, the CSE, vaccination, etc. “They” thus become an amalgam of politicians, experts and the media.

And Cuba?

In Cuba, people are rarely confronted with professional advertising. They have access to science through a (quality) education system and noncommercial media. Cuban television explained, even before the first case appeared on their soil, what COVID is, how the pandemic developed in the world, how to fight it and what measures would therefore follow.

Cubans know that their scientists work for the common good. They experience this almost every year, when, for example, villages and towns in the path of hurricanes, plotted by the world’s best meteorologists, are evacuated as a precaution. They have seen HIV quickly brought under control through strong prevention measures.

They also see that the approach to dengue and zika is scientific, effective and transparent, so that these diseases have minimal casualties.

Distrust of solidarity

Effective management of the pandemic requires solidarity. The majority of the population, who personally have little to fear from the disease, must show solidarity with the (very) elderly and other vulnerable groups. Vaccination is important for everyone but also for children, in order to reduce as quickly as possible the circulation of the virus in the community, in favor of the weakest.

Most people in Belgium find this reason enough to do their bit. This also applies to the observance of sanitary measures. It is surprising that not more Belgians say: “I am healthy and strong enough; I don’t need a vaccine; the others can take care of themselves.”

Here, the whole commercial, neoliberal culture reminds people daily that they must work on their personal development and do better and better in life, which is a euphemism for getting rich. We are presented with an ideal of absolute autonomy; we are told that we must not depend on others and certainly not on “the State,” at the risk of being a parasite.

This neoliberal culture portrays the unions as protecting those who accept help from the government, who they call “profiteers.” This culture promotes streamlining the government by cutting social welfare and health care funds. Such a culture, instead of encouraging solidarity, discourages it.

And Cuba?

Cubans do not grow up in a spirit of competition or every person for themselves. They know from experience that only by working together can they meet the immense challenges facing their country. They are used to overcoming problems together, unfortunately now more than ever. Helping neighbors, cleaning the neighborhood together, meeting and making decisions together in the workplace, etc. — this is how they live.

Solidarity runs in their veins. For decades they have been sending doctors, nurses and teachers to the four corners of the world. A small country of 11 million people, with 10 times less resources than Belgium, has sent doctors to Italy to fight against COVID.

This attitude and way of life is the fourth reason for the near absence of anti-vaccine movements in Cuba.

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