

Another world: Berlin students visit Cuba



The Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences in Berlin organized an exchange programme with Cuba at the beginning of the year (Source: Rebecca Stoll)

Shiny, colorful vintage cars, socialism, and the sunset on a palm-lined beach accompanied by salsa music: these are the images that most people had in mind about Cuba before they set off on their study trip to Cuba in February 2024. The delegation from the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences in Berlin spent an entire semester actively preparing for their academic exchange with the new partner university in Sancti Spíritus (*Universidad de Sancti Spíritus José Martí Pérez*, or UNISS for short): The history and contexts of Cuba were extensively studied, but they probably would not have believed that this trip would end up changing their world views by making them realize how much rich the beaten Cuba is despite all the hurdles imposed on it. But Cuba is not a country where you go on vacation, it is another world that you immerse yourself in.

Social work in Cuba and Germany

The students in the Bachelor's degree course in Social Work were welcomed to Sancti Spíritus at the end of February by professors and students in the *trabajo social y cultural* (Social Cultural Work) and *gestión sociocultural para el desarrollo* (Sociocultural Management for Development) courses with a warm welcome ritual. "Social work" as a course of study has a slightly different interpretation in Cuba than in Germany - the promotion of cultural life and creativity is very important in Cuba and has been one of the central pillars of social interaction since the revolution, which is why social work in Cuba is always linked to culture. Even at a young age, artistic identity is encouraged and the importance of a vibrant culture is explained. Cultural education and participation in cultural life are essential components of social cultural work in Cuba. In this context, UNISS supports and promotes various communities and projects throughout the region, which also serve as places for networking and "power-sharing".

As is well known, the USA is trying to seal off the Cuban island and its inhabitants from the global trade market and the world economy. Not only, but above all, petrol is therefore currently a rarity throughout the country, and domestic transportation has become a luxury that locals can barely afford. This makes it all the more extraordinary that the prospective social workers were provided with a local bus so that they could meet the group and, above all, gain an in-depth insight into the country: Numerous excursions were made to various communities far outside Sancti Spíritus, which showed what everyday life and the working methods of Cuban social workers are like, and thus provided a number of "aha" experiences about socio-cultural work in Cuba.

Radio equipment from the former GDR

One of these visits led to the provincial radio station Radio Sancti Spíritus (RSS), the largest radio station in the region. On site, there was a reception consisting of various broadcasters, journalists, communicators, artists and program directors, who provided deep insights into the multidimensional work of the station. The program appeals with diverse content: there are broadcasts mainly aimed at the rural population, information and news sections on news from politics, agriculture, environmental protection, and culture, as well as a carefully compiled "mezcla" of salsa, guaracha, mambo, guaguancó, son, contemporary music trends, and much more to offer something for all age groups among the listeners. A tour of the sound carrier archive underlined the broad musical programme of the station and made the hearts of music lovers beat faster: countless records, cassettes and tapes - quite a few with the inscription "Made in the German Democratic Republic" - are carefully stored, maintained, restored, and digitized here to inspire listeners. In various studio rooms, you can still find equipment such as mixing consoles from the GDR, which are still kept alive decades later by the sound engineers.



A retreat for the German students has been set up in the former UNEAC art center, where they can regularly reflect on what they have experienced and talk about what is yet to come, sometimes (as in the picture) also used for lectures. (Source: Tim Schäfer)

Once in the broadcasting room, the students were able to watch and listen to a radio announcer during one of his live announcements, before one student was even invited into his box for a short interview with the announcer. Finally, the group was able to witness a local band recording a song in one of the recording rooms. A songwriter performed a song written especially for the Berlin visit, with rhythmic accompaniment from the band - live on air! A wonderful gesture that touched many of the students.

Chair for seniors

The students were offered another excursion to the EMPROVA workshop for people with disabilities in Sancti Spíritus. In this workshop, dozens of people with physical and mental disabilities produce a wide variety of textiles and household goods. Unlike in Germany, it is a matter of course in this workshop that people receive the statutory minimum wage for their work. As a thank you for their visit, the students received home-made potholders, cushion covers and tablecloths, which now adorn one or two homes in Berlin.

Another project that the Alice Salomon University students were able to visit was the "*Cátedra del Adulto Mayor*" in the *Galería de Arte Oscar Fernández Morera*, a chair for senior citizens funded by UNISS. In this facility, people of an advanced age can not only continue their education, but also take part in numerous group activities and creative workshops. From poetry and creative writing to an in-house women's choir, the students were offered touching works that didn't leave everyone's eyes dry. In addition to the wide range of activities on offer at the *Cátedra del Adulto Mayor*, this facility also functions as a place of networking for older people. Because if the facilities visited conveyed one feeling, it was that no one is abandoned in Cuba.

Academic exchange

The cooperation between ASH and UNISS is power-sharing of a special kind: it is designed to be long-term, and this was the first face-to-face meeting that was able to take place despite infrastructural hurdles, mainly thanks to the organizational and improvisational talent of the two lead professors Dr. C. José Ramón Neira and Dra. C. Doralquis León Gonzalez. Lectures by numerous UNISS lecturers on topics ranging from social policy and economics to environmental policy and science were tirelessly translated by Professor Dr. C. Filipe Hernández Pentón, who made it possible to transcend language barriers.

For example, a representative of the Ministry of the Environment provided insights into the ecological disasters that Cuba is facing due to climate change in addition to the decades-long US blockade: due to its location, Cuba is highly susceptible to hurricanes and extreme weather, which often leave billions of dollars' worth of damage in their wake. Rising sea levels also lead to the salinization of valuable agricultural land, while rising water temperatures destroy the extensive coral reefs. Despite these hurdles, Cuba has managed to become a global role model: The country converted its own agricultural production to fully eco-sustainable and has long been praised for its sophisticated protection strategy regarding

hurricanes, which always claim fewer lives than in Cuba's neighboring countries. According to the 2019 SDI (Sustainable Development Index) report, Cuba ranks among the top five most sustainably developed countries in the world, while Germany is just 134th.

Even beyond the academic level, exchange was always a central point: the Cuban students showed their home and showed the German students selfless hospitality, but above all the warmth and humanity that is sometimes sought in vain in Germany. As one Cuban said on the subject of racism: "Everyone here sits at the same table and drinks from the same glass of rum." A symbol of what this exchange wanted to achieve: an all-round effort to not only get to know the Cuban system, but also to show the participants what community actually means and how we should create it not only around us, but above all around the world. With cultural social work. But above all: with solidarity. Because solidarity is what holds humanity together.

A guest article by Aaron Benjes, Nerea Moratilla Lozano, and Sophie Strauß.

The authors are students at the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences Berlin in the BA Social Work program and prospective social workers. They visited the partner university UNISS in February and March 2024 as part of a delegation of students and professors as part of the cooperation partnership concluded at the end of 2022. ([Cubaheute](#))