

Changes in Cuba

While not as fast as many would like to see, change is happening in Cuba. Here we catalogue some of the most important ways that these changes are affecting the daily lives of more and more Cubans. More and faster change is needed to spur the economy and improve the lives of millions of Cubans. Increasingly, more Cubans are driving their own history and building a better life for their families. One thing is undeniable: 50 years of an isolationist embargo policy failed to create change in Cuba. A new U.S. policy of engagement offers more opportunities for supporting the Cuban people as they seek a better future.

Increasing Entrepreneurship & Private Sector Growth:



Beginning in 2010, self-employment licenses were nearly 150,000; in five years, that number increased to 505,000 and counting. Private-sector employment, including authorized self-employed and gray-area activities, now account for up to 40 percent of the Cuban labor force. Many of these private businesses have been allowed to sell their products and services to state and foreign-owned enterprises.

Private Markets for Homes and Automobiles:



New laws passed in 2011 allowed citizens and permanent residents to buy and sell real estate for the first time since the 1960s. This property can be used to house a private business, e.g., B&Bs and restaurants, with over 2,000 rentals now available on the Airbnb platform, or as a primary or secondary residence. The private sale of used cars was authorized as well.

Increasing Private Agricultural Activities:



Private citizens can now use small parcels of idle land to produce and sell agricultural produce to private and state buyers.

Expanding Telecommunications & Internet Access:



Mobile phone ownership in Cuba has increased tenfold since 2008, when the government allowed mobile phone ownership with pre-paid subscriptions and later allowed phones to be sent as gifts from the United States. The number of mobile phone subscriptions on the island increased from 300,000 to more than 3 million as of May 2015.

Cuba increased the number of Wi-Fi hotspots from zero to 65 by the end of 2015 and cut the cost of usage by 50 percent. Further expansion will take place in 2016, including 80 new public Wi-Fi hotspots. Daily Internet access averaged more than 150,000 people in 2015, more than double the 2014 statistics. One result: the number of people with email access has increased significantly.

Cuba also announced pilot broadband service to homes, restaurants, bars, and cafes, with a goal of reaching 50 percent household penetration and 60 percent mobile penetration by 2020.

Travel Allowances & Freedom of Movement:



The exit visa requirement for Cubans was eliminated in 2013, leading to a surge in travel abroad. Eliminating the exit visa was arguably the most significant political reform as it eased travel restrictions for dissidents, entrepreneurs, and families who are able to travel and return to Cuba. Civil society leaders and every day Cubans are now regularly traveling to Washington, D.C., Miami, and across the United States, as well as to Europe and Latin America.

Increasing Civil Society Activity:



New civil society organizations have emerged including groups concerned about environment and climate; afro-Cubans, women, and the LGBT community; religion; human rights broadly; access to information; and economic and governance issues. Independent bloggers are proliferating along with the flow of information through flash drives and social media.