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Frances Colón

State Department science adviser speaks out on Cuba

By [Richard Stone \(/author/richard-stone\)](/author/richard-stone) | 14 May 2015 1:00 pm | [1 Comment](#)
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This week's issue of *Science* features a [cover story on how Cuban science is poised to join the modern world \(http://news.sciencemag.org/latin-america/2015/05/feature-cold\)](http://news.sciencemag.org/latin-america/2015/05/feature-cold). Revised travel rules are easing visits to Cuba for U.S. scientists, and the U.S. Department of Commerce now allows scientific equipment to be freely donated to Cuba, so long as it does not have potential military applications.

Frances Colón, acting science and technology adviser to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, is helping shape U.S. government policy on what the rapprochement with Cuba means for U.S. scientists. Colón, a neuroscientist

by training, made an official visit to Havana in April 2014. *Science* Insider caught up with her on the sidelines of a science diplomacy workshop held at AAAS (publisher of *Science*) last month; Colón agreed to supply written answers to a set of questions that were cleared for public release.

Q: Revised Commerce Department regulations now permit the donation of non–dual-use scientific equipment and materials to Cuba. Based on your own personal observations of the state of Cuban science, how important is this development, and could it be a useful tool for science diplomacy with Cuba?

A: Science and technology entrepreneurs in Cuba demonstrate tremendous potential. These innovators have some tools at their disposal, but there is so much more that can be done to bring their ideas to life. This would require better, updated tools and equipment. In the United States, such tools and equipment are often discarded long before their utility is exhausted. Donating certain science and technology equipment can be a powerful mechanism for empowering and surfacing individual talent—innovators that our researchers and experts are eager to collaborate with to solve shared challenges.

Q: Should legitimate science engagement with Cuba be promoted independently of any dialogue on human rights in Cuba, and if so, why?

A: We collaborate with Cuba in a number of areas of mutual interest, many of which are in the science and technology fields: oil spill prevention and response, seismic issues, environmental cooperation, health issues, etc. This was already happening prior to the president's December 2014 announcement on the new approach to Cuba, so you have your answer right there.

What this shift allows us to do is to take stock of mutually beneficial areas of collaboration that can be either expanded or started. Science, technology, and innovation are essential to finding solutions to the greatest challenges of our time, including climate change, adequate food production, disaster preparedness, cybersecurity, and physical security. We should empower innovators wherever they are, because solutions can come from anywhere and will more often than not be an idea that is developed and tested by teams that span national and institutional borders. Given our proximity and shared challenges, U.S.-Cuba cooperation can benefit the people of both countries, which is why we continue to pursue it.

Q: Cubans often complain about barriers to scientific collaboration from the U.S. side, with the embargo being the primary focus of their ire. But the Cuban side, too, throws up barriers to collaboration. What are the key barriers that U.S. scientists have encountered, that you know of?

A: More than anything else, Cuban science and technology entrepreneurs need connectivity to finally move into the 21st century of scientific discoveries and technology development. The amendments to sanctions regulations on 16 January prioritize opening more space for engagement by U.S. telecom and Internet-based service companies, in order to support more connectivity for the Cuban people. The United States promotes the free flow of information to, from, and among the Cuban people. For scientists, finding collaborators and staying current in respective fields of expertise requires such access to information and connectivity.

Q: U.S. federal funds by law can't be spent on Cuban science. What role therefore do you see for the State Department in promoting science diplomacy with Cuba?

A: I receive calls on a daily basis from universities and technology groups in the United States eager to collaborate with Cuban experts. More than financial assistance, they seek guidance on how to properly and strategically engage counterparts on the island. Several U.S. NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and academic institutions have ongoing collaboration with Cuba, and the new approach should only make this easier to pursue —enabling these groups to find the best partners to fuel joint discoveries and advance their fields of study.

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