



How to feed homeless in Cuba despite setbacks

By Carmen Sesin
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It was a picture on twitter of homeless people sleeping in a kiosk on top of newspapers and covered with old rags, in her hometown of Colon that caught the attention of Maria Cama, 12 years after she left Cuba.

“It impacted me so much,” said Cama from her small office in Miami where she teaches piano lessons.

For Cama, it was evident the amount of people begging on the streets had increased in Colon – a town of about 72,000 in the province of Matanzas.

In fact, the [Cuban government](#) has acknowledged in the past the island has a deficit of 600,000 homes.

“I’m sure it’s much more than that... there is a crisis with housing and this has been the case for a long time,” said Ian Vasquez, Director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.

Cama decided “we can do something together between exiles and the opposition in Cuba,” – a concept that hasn’t been seen often during 55 years of communist rule.

She contacted opposition activists in Colon who agreed to work with her. The first meal, held on April 27, 2012, in the house of Caridad Burunate, a member of the opposition group [Ladies in White](#), was a success. Those who attended were surprised.

“They were so happy and also shocked, asking who was organizing this and why,” Burunate said by phone from her home in Colon where the dinners are held weekly.

As the project grew, they not only fed homeless, but also needy members of the community who don’t have enough to eat on a daily basis, including mentally ill, elderly, children, and handicapped.

Originally the dinners were scheduled for each Saturday. But according to [Burunate members of State Security](#) would wait at the corner and detain people as they walked to her house.

Maria Cama in her office as she read an email she had just received from one of the activists she works with. (Courtesy)

Cama decided to hold the dinners spontaneously, rather than on a fixed day in order to avoid detentions. The day the dinners are held, a few of the 10 activists involved in the project comb the streets looking for the needy.

The individuals, many of whom are considered social outcasts, feel at home in Burunate's house and stay for a good part of the day. "We treat them with a lot of love and affection," she explained.

According to Burunate, she has faced acts of repudiation since the project began, with government supporters throwing asphalt, excrement, eggs, and rocks at her house. She said the opposition activists involved in the project have been temporarily detained and freed in remote areas each weekend since the project began.

"Project Tondique," as it is called, is feeding around 50 people with donations from individuals in the US and Spain. Also, some farmers in Cuba donate fruits and vegetables they cultivate on their land.

Cama said she wanted the name of the project to unify the historic exile community with the new opposition in Cuba, so she chose the name "Project Tondique," after a legendary figure some regard as a patriotic hero.

Margarito Lanza Flores (AKA Capitan Tondiquee) was a 24 year-old peasant who rebelled against [Fidel Castro's forces](#) in the early 1960s. According to local stories, he evaded being captured for a long time because he knew the land well. "He knew how to dig holes, walk backwards... when they were looking for him in the South, he would appear in the North," Cama explained proudly.

Tondique was finally captured, tortured, and executed. "Before being killed, Tondique said 'come over and see how a real man dies,'" she said. According to Cama, Tondique's name unifies the exile community with the community service of the new opposition.

Vasquez said initiatives like 'Project Tondique,' "are a reflection of attitudes among Cuban-Americans. Some of it is generational. People are tired of old policies not working."

Cama concluded, "with the help of God, if the funds continue coming in and I find the right people to work with, I would like to expand the project throughout Cuba."