

# COOPER INSTITUTE ACTIVITIES REPORT 2021



*With the support of many generous donors Cooper Institute has been active in the community for more than 35 years.*

81 Prince Street, Charlottetown, PE C1A 4R3 Telephone: 902.894.4573  
cooperinstitute@eastlink.ca www.cooperinstitute.ca

## PEI Working Group for a Livable Income

It is 19 years since the founding of the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income (WGLI). In one way this was one of the most difficult years, because of COVID 19 restrictions. From the beginning the members have inspired each other in face-to-face meetings. However, despite the challenges and discomfort of online meetings, we had one of the most productive years thus far.

We found opportunities to challenge a widespread attitude among influential people that poverty reduction could somehow morph into poverty elimination. As supportive as we are of any program which supports people with low income, we reject the tendency of some sectors to falsely identify some social betterment programs as “Basic Income”.

We followed the general outline of our strategic plan for our central program, Basic Income Guarantee (BIG). Over the years the four areas of engagement have been in full operation and adapted to the changing times. Engagement was with a) the wider PEI community; b) public policy makers; c) the media; and d) cross-country basic income groups.

**a) The wider PEI community:** While the possibility of in-person community forums was no longer possible we designed ways of making as much contact as possible in preparation for post-pandemic times. Highly gifted members designed a set of talking points based on frequently asked questions. These can be *freely* shared with the community. We invited our supporting community organizations to host presentations on Basic Income Guarantee. This prompted the design of a slide show which forms the basis of these presentations, for which three organizations signed up. In another effort we extended our group of individual promoters by 35 more people who now receive updates about once a month. Our hope is to have an in-person meeting with them to encourage action. All of this is done within the context of our belief that it is the people in the community who have the power to create political will, both provincially and federally.

**b) Public policy makers:** Working Group members met with two MLAs from the Official Opposition for a good exchange on possible plans for basic income in PEI. We hope to soon have a meeting with the Minister of Social Development and Housing. On the federal level we had an uplifting meeting with basic income advocate, Senator Kim Pate, and two Island senators (Brian Francis and Diane Griffin).



Members of the Working Group with Senators Kim Pate and Diane Griffin in October

**c) Cross-country basic income groups:** A Cooper Institute member represents the PEI Working Group for a Livable Income on the national basic income advocate network, *Coalition Canada Basic Income-revenu de base*. The coalition is one of three Canada-wide organizations which have seen unbelievable progress over the past year in the advance of basic income. See Coalition Canada’s website for their year-end review: <https://basicincomecoalition.ca>.

Work with Coalition Canada is demanding, dynamic and inspiring. The organization at different times during the year included representatives from all provinces and two territories. The uniting force of the group is a deep commitment to moving forward with the establishment of basic income for all of Canada.

There is general agreement that Prince Edward Island is an ideal launching ground for an experimental, demonstration Basic Income Guarantee

program. Most assume that PEI is ready, though those of us closer to the ground would tend to downplay that readiness. It cannot be denied that all parties in the PEI Legislature have been unanimous in recognizing the need to move forward. Island promoters of basic income realize that political will, supported by the will of the people, must be nurtured. Premier King has been consistent in his support and in trying to engage the Prime Minister and the Federal Government.

It appears that the onus is now on the new Federal Government. To this end Coalition Canada is identifying MPs and senators who are supportive of basic income. A group of Senators has once again petitioned the Prime Minister and Ministers to take concrete steps toward establishing basic income for Canada and have come out once again in support of PEI as a good testing ground for a nationwide basic income program.

Coalition Canada is engaging with well-known politicians, economists, and civil servants to develop a solid implementation procedure which will convince federal politicians that a PEI demonstration basic income program is both feasible and advantageous. The coalition is currently in the process of organizing a massive week of advocacy the first week of March 2022 to engage politicians in support of basic income.

## Islanders for Proportional Representation

In the words of Cooper Institute's representative in Islanders for Proportional Representation (IPR), who has been a Proportional Representation advocate since 2005: "This past year was by far the most difficult one in my experience. It was not because of the opposition to Proportional Representation (PR), which, of course, is still alive and well and maybe even gloating, in spite of the high percentages of citizens who favor PR. No, it is the general denial that PR is, or ever was, an aspiration. It seems like a scary horror film in which some mysterious creature enters the universe, destroys a whole population and its memory for the rest of the world.

Even in the insipid heat of the snap federal election of September 20, 2021, most people, politicians and electorate alike, seemed to have forgotten electoral reform. This was the second election run on *first past the post* since Justin Trudeau promised that the 2015 election would be the last under that system. We recall that during the 2015 campaign he repeated that promise more than 1,800 times. It was obvious that after he got a majority

government it was no longer an issue for him. Furthermore, it soon became clear that he was never a promoter of PR, but merely of a variation in the method of counting ballots (ranked ballot).

In this setting, Islanders for Proportional Representation seemed to be the sole group advocating for PR, meeting regularly and speaking publicly about the need for electoral restructuring. We have appreciated the number of times that individuals have highlighted in the media the need for PR in PEI. We published an opinion piece on why political parties have conveniently shunned Proportional Representation and made it disappear as a policy issue. Over the course of the year we have appreciated the Fair Vote Canada webinars and publications.

At year's end we were surprised by a motion which passed in the PEI Legislature to establish a Citizens' Assembly to create a path toward proportional representation in PEI.

## Seeds of Community

*Seed sharing:* The COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 meant that we were unable to hold our usual, and very popular, seed exchanges in various Island communities.

Instead, our seed-exchange partner, the Public Library, made it possible for gardening enthusiasts to get seeds from our Confederation Centre Public Library's seed library. The wonderful library staff put together seed kits that could be picked up at Island libraries. The kits included seeds for gardeners interested in starting tomato and other plants indoors, and seeds to be direct-seeded in the spring. The kits proved to be very much in demand as, twice supplies ran out in a matter of days.

In March, as a means of encouraging local seed-saving, Cooper Institute prepared and presented a webinar, organized by PEI Public Libraries, on "Planning Your Garden for Saving Seeds".

*PEI Seed Alliance:* The Alliance extended its reach to many new customers this year. All of the seeds offered by the Alliance (in 2021 all grown by Tina Davies of Emmerdale Eden Farms) are locally adapted, organic, open-pollinated varieties. By contributing to local seed sovereignty, the Alliance is helping to preserve biodiversity and increase resilience in our food system. Cooper Institute helped to facilitate and continues to support the Alliance by maintaining its website and helping with seed sales. See the Alliance's website for more information and to order seeds: [peiseedalliance.ca](https://peiseedalliance.ca).

## PEI Fight for Affordable Housing

In 2021, Cooper Institute partnered with the PEI Fight for Affordable Housing (PEIFAH) on two “tenant empowerment” projects, one funded by United Way of PEI (which ended in April) and another by the Community Housing Transformation Centre (which ends in November 2022). The projects aim is to develop an organization of low and moderate-income tenants in Prince Edward Island, filling a gap that has existed in this province for the past 50 years.

Our overall goal is to ensure that the concerns of low and moderate-income tenants in PEI are reflected in the policies and programs that protect their rights and provide secure and affordable housing. Tenants have specific and informed understandings of the rental housing market and how it impacts their lives. Inclusion of their knowledge and expertise in all policies and programs will result in healthier and more livable communities.

The projects have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial work involved connecting with currently existing tenants’ associations across Canada and running a three-part webinar series: the concept of tenant associations, tenants’ rights, and how tenants could take the first step to organizing their neighbours. The webinars were used to create an organizing committee of interested tenants who would guide and facilitate the organization of a tenants’ association.

Initially, it became clear that many tenants on PEI are not even in a stable enough position to think about organizing. Through the webinars, the Project Coordinator was able to make contact with tenants in a housing complex who were initially dealing with a Rental Office hearing for a renoviction. By helping the tenants organize their neighbours and prepare for their hearing, PEIFAH managed to put a stop to the renoviction and get the rent increase reduced from 50% to 26%.

In the months that followed, the same story was repeated. Once one issue was dealt with, another issue came up. Managing to stop an eviction led to immediately working on stopping a rent increase. In May, the PEIFAH was able to run a short, but effective, campaign on Short-Term Rentals (STRs) regulation in Charlottetown. Over the span of two weeks, volunteers gathered hundreds of signatures in support of limiting STRs such as AirBnB to an exclusively owner-occupied model. The final petition included over 900 signatures and was delivered directly to Charlottetown City Council.

In January 2022, City Councillors passed owner-occupied regulation of STRs through a first reading.



We facilitated the tenant organizing committee’s participation in the Organizing for Power program, an international labour organizing training curriculum. After finishing the program, the committee mapped out its first campaign, targeted at properties owned by the landlord who had tried to increase rent by 50%.

Door-knocking taught organizers about rampant issues affecting tenants in all of the properties: little to no snow removal, egregious lack of maintenance, and an all-around atmosphere of disrespect when dealing with the landlord. Due to a series of unforeseen issues unrelated to the properties, the campaign had to be put on hold. We went back to working through Rental Office cases to look for other properties of concern, and tenants who may be interested in organizing. What became clear by the end of November, was that while Rental Office casework was good for building an initial level of trust with tenants, the case-by-case approach was time consuming and labour intensive.

Perhaps coincidentally, in response to PEIFAH’s work in Rental Office hearings, landlords have attempted to remove volunteers from multiple hearings and appeals. The most recent attempt has been taken to the PEI Supreme Court and is a direct result of the impact of our work. While troubling for the future of assisting tenants in this way, it has freed PEIFAH up to focus on organizing tenants more directly.

The current project will continue until November 2022. Our focus now is on mobilizing tenants to improve the draft Residential Tenancy Act. A larger-scale campaign such as this will create an opportunity for helping interested tenants see the benefits of collective action, and we hope, commit to it by becoming involved in and helping to form a tenants’ association.



## Coalition for the Protection of PEI Water

Finally, after many years in the works, in 2021 PEI's Water Act was implemented, taking effect on June 16. The year also saw the release of regulations for the Act, and of an irrigation strategy, both subject to limited public consultation.

Over the course of the year, Coalition members collaborated on many op-eds on the Water Act, its regulations, and the need for a water conservation strategy for the Island. We co-hosted three webinars on land and water issues.

Early in the year, the Minister of the Environment announced that under the Water Act, the moratorium on high-capacity wells would be suspended for construction of 5 new wells for research purposes, and that irrigation holding ponds would be grandfathered into the new legislation. In response, members of the Coalition signed an open letter to the Minister condemning these provisions and calling on him to respect the intent and spirit of the Water Act by requiring all holding ponds to be compliant with Water Act regulations within 2 years, and by disallowing any exemption to the moratorium. We continued to demand that the PEI Government introduce a plan to begin the transition from an industrial model of farming - with its high reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides - to a more sustainable one that recognizes the climate crisis.



Holding ponds were in the news once again in 2021

The Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability was charged with managing the consultation - comments on the draft regulations can be seen on the [Legislative Assembly website](#). The Coalition called for, among other things, stricter requirements for drought contingency plans, no grandfathering of holding ponds, and a complete moratorium on high-capacity wells.

Towards the end of the year the PEI government launched a limited consultation on its draft irrigation strategy. The Coalition noted that the strategy seemed to assume an infinite supply of water and was developed in the absence of any consideration of the impacts of climate change. We reiterated our position that irrigation should be seen as an element of a

broader water policy, and that the water governance model proposed in the strategy be redesigned to allow for meaningful community involvement.

Unfortunately, despite the implementation of the long-awaited Water Act, not much has changed. As the Coalition wrote in an opinion piece published in April, "trust in government's ability to protect our water, to resist corporate influence and to listen to citizens has eroded particularly in the years since the Water Act was passed. Fish kills, anoxic conditions, and high nitrate levels continue in our waters."

## Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands

Since its beginning in 2018, the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands, of which Cooper Institute is a founding member, has been committed to the clarification and enforcement of the spirit and intent of the PEI Lands Protection Act. The Coalition is firm in its opposition to the goals and practices of the industrial-corporate system of agriculture.

This past year was an active one on two fronts: engagement of the PEI population to influence public policy and direct contact with policy makers who are obliged to be unyielding protectors of PEI lands. In our efforts to engage the public, we took on actions in four areas of action: a) In cooperation with the Coalition for the Protection of PEI Water, we held three webinars on issues related to land and water. b) We researched and presented opinion pieces. c) We produced two sets of paid radio ads about the current predominant system of agriculture, the resulting loss of productive farmland, and the long-term effects on the wellbeing of all Island residents. d) We sent three newsletters to a wide range of supporting subscribers.

The Coalition spent considerable time and energy researching, preparing and presenting submissions to agencies designed to influence public policy: The Land Matters Advisory Committee (January) and the Standing Committee on Natural Resources & Environmental Sustainability (February). In addition, we created a letter to the Premier in which we requested a meeting, outlining our concerns. This was not done lightly given the widespread conviction in the wider community that powerful entities in PEI agriculture seem to have the ear of the Premier and his influential circle. There was no response from the Premier's office, which was a major disappointment.

Specific areas of investigation for the Coalition were reviews of landholdings and acquisitions of the Irvings, Vanco Farms and the Great Enlightenment Buddhist Institute Society (GEBIS) and of the BC Land Owner Transparency Act (2019) and registry.



Taking a diagnostic look at our year as community based protectors of PEI lands, it is no surprise that our positions are upsetting to powerful sectors. What was surprising, however, was the vitriol with which that was expressed. An alarming amount of energy and advertising money was put into declaring that organizations such as ours are lacking in the “facts” and deprived of capacity to read and understand the “science”. They wrongfully and unfairly presented us to the PEI public as people “against farmers”. One Minister used his position of power in the Legislature to make a vile accusation against one of our trusted member organizations. In one way, their reactions indicate how tenuous their power is, and how vulnerable they feel, when they are so easily threatened by a small group of people who dare ask difficult questions. This should give us hope that the obstacles are not insurmountable and that small groups of everyday people have the power to make progressive change.

### Supported Decision-Making

After many false starts and prolonged periods of inaction, supported decision-making legislation was finally drafted by staff in the PEI Department of Social Development and Housing in 2021. Sadly, the Coalition, of which Cooper Institute is a member, could not support the draft and made this clear to government in meetings and in a written submission.

The primary reason was that it lacked any sense of what supported decision-making truly is and what it is meant to accomplish. We want legislation that will enhance and protect the right to self-determination for people with disabilities and cognitive impairments. In its current draft, the law would exclude the people it’s meant to help. On one hand the draft includes a definition of capacity that recognizes that everyone has a right to have help from a supporter when making a decision, and this is repeated in the other legislation concerned with decision-making. But the draft Supported Decision-Making Act contradicts this idea by saying that individuals must be deemed capable before choosing supporters (and entering into a supported decision-making agreement).

The Coalition was shocked to learn there would be no meaningful public consultation on the Act. For many years we have felt our contributions and our experience with individuals who would benefit from supported decision-making have been valued by government. It is disappointing that we have been ignored and that so far, the legislation fails to reflect basic principles of supported decision-making.

### Trade Justice PEI

For the past 8 years, Cooper Institute members have been involved in a coalition of groups and individuals advocating for a model of international trade that is democratic, environmentally sustainable, supportive of a transition to a carbon neutral economy which benefits workers, and which respects the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Trade Justice PEI has voiced concerns about vaccine inequity. While almost 80% of people in Canada had been fully vaccinated by year’s end, in poorer countries the coverage was (and remains) woefully low. In Africa the rate of vaccination was approximately 7% for the entire continent, with many countries closer to 1%.

In 2021 we focused on drawing public attention to the need for Canada to back a proposal to the World Trade Organization for a temporary waiver of intellectual property rights related to COVID-19 vaccines, treatments, and equipment. Canada continues to block this initiative. We published op-eds and media releases, pointing out that, in a global health crisis, the waiver would enable timely scaling up of production of drugs and medical equipment around the world, making them more accessible and affordable. Through emails and social media, we encouraged people to sign a petition addressed to the House of Commons. In March we joined 38 national organizations urging Canada to support the waiver as a means of promoting equal access to vaccines around the world.



At the end of the year Canada’s position remained unchanged. Drug companies, having received enormous government subsidies, continued to accrue profits at an extraordinary rate. According to a news release from OXFAM, while 98% of people in low-income countries had still not been fully vaccinated, Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna were earning a combined \$1,000 every *second* selling their COVID-19 vaccines, mainly to a handful of wealthy nations.

## Migrant Workers

While many of us had hoped that the impacts of the pandemic would have subsided in 2021, we continue to see its negative effects on vulnerable populations. Migrant workers arriving in Canada faced many of the same barriers as they did in 2020, and many new ones. COVID pre-screening has added additional costs for migrant workers arriving in PEI and, while navigating the healthcare system has always been challenging for migrant workers, it became even more difficult in the era of COVID-19.

In 2021, Cooper Institute supported workers by booking vaccine appointments, translating medical information, and providing transportation. Since many workers do not have provincial health cards, we supported them with getting proper documentation of their vaccination status since it has become a requirement for many activities in the community.

Issues revolving around COVID-19 also existed in the homes of migrant workers. Many expressed concerns about overcrowding and disregard for social distancing measures. Throughout the year, Cooper Institute worked alongside workers to shine light on such issues and support them over these obstacles.



The Action Team in a rare face to face meeting

In June, Cooper Institute co-published *Safe at Work, Unsafe at Home: COVID-19 and Temporary Foreign Workers in Prince Edward Island*, research that explored the experiences of migrant workers living in PEI throughout the pandemic. Fifteen participants who had entered PEI through various streams of Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program were interviewed. The report highlighted many hidden costs migrant workers face, long workdays without adequate time off, issues with the federally mandated 14-day quarantine and overcrowded, inadequate housing. Single family homes, in some instances, hosted up to 17 people. In one instance, 31 people shared three bathrooms, while in another, 45 people shared four stoves. The report gained significant media attention and received backlash from some employers.

In December, the Auditor General of Canada released a report echoing the same concerns, highlighting Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) disregard for the health and safety of migrant farm workers during the 2020 and 2021 seasons. Cooper Institute commented on the significance of the report in a press release.

In 2021, we had numerous consultations with government officials regarding the health, safety, and protection of migrant workers' rights. Meetings were held with the Ministers of Health, Agriculture, and Economic Growth and Tourism. On the federal level, program coordinators met with senior staff of ESDC and Service Canada to offer input regarding its online reporting tool for abuse and the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Worker application process.

2021 saw huge developments in policy for migrant workers in PEI. After nearly a decade of calling for provincial legislation to enhance their protections, the PEI government finally introduced a Temporary Foreign Worker Protection Act. Members of Cooper Institute presented to the Standing Committee on Education and Economic Growth in June and were happy to see many of their ideas included in the committee's recommendations to the legislature. The bill will receive second reading in 2022.

Much of Cooper Institute's work with migrant workers has been sustained by funding from the Campbell Webster Foundation and KAIROS' Empowering Migrant Workers Project. With their support, Cooper Institute was able to hire new staff to work on the Migrant Worker Program. A big thank you to the hard work of Kate Liu and Fallon Mawhinney, who worked with us in 2021, and as always, to the members of the PEI Action Team for Migrant Workers' Rights for their support.

Cooper Institute organized webinars for migrant workers about mobility and residency during COVID-19, hosted holiday celebrations for Mexican Independence Day, supported workers in obtaining driver's licenses and in many other ways.

We supported several workers to apply for the *Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers* for individuals who have experienced abuse at the hands of their employer and provided support in finding short-term housing and new work opportunities.

We strengthened many partnerships on the local and national level in 2021 and look forward to continuing this work in 2022. We will continue to call upon the federal government to stop its band-aid solutions to problems in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program and demand permanent status for all migrant workers upon arrival in Canada.

## Responding to Racism - BIPOC USHR

The United Way funded project “Responding to Racism” came to an end in April. As reported a year ago, the project, which was a result of a partnership between BIPOC USHR and Cooper Institute, saw two black women hired to advocate, support, and connect the BIPOC community with services and supports. Their reach was extensive, as was the range of issues and concerns they took on. From accompanying people in court, to arranging for therapy services and providing emergency housing, the navigators connected people with resources, along the way developing relationships with service providers, programs and organizations. The navigators did indeed respond to racism in every interaction and used their wisdom and the knowledge and experiences that were shared with them to develop recommendations for policy change in each of four primary areas of concern: Education, Justice, Healthcare and Safety.

In January, BIPOC USHR became incorporated as a non-profit corporation, applied for and received funding, and has since opened an office and hired staff, including an executive director.

### Organizational Support

Members of the Cooper Institute collective work with and support many organizations in various ways:

**La Société acadienne et francophone de l'Île**

**Parkinson Society Maritime Region (PEI)**

**Breaking the Silence Maritimes-Guatemala  
Solidarity Network**

**P.E.I. Supported Decision-Making Coalition**

**Voluntary Resource Council**

**National Farmers Union**

**Save Our Seas and Shores PEI**

**Atlantic Council for International Cooperation**

**Coalition for the Protection of PEI Water**

**Coalition for the Protection of PEI Lands**

**Coalition Canada Basic Income - revenu de base**

**Latin American Mission Program (LAMP)**

**PEI Action Team for Migrant Workers' Rights**

**Lennon House Association**

**PEI Fight for Affordable Housing**

**Cinema Politica Charlottetown**

## Fundraising Committee

Once again in 2021 fundraising efforts were a great success. Des Duffy and his spouse, Yvonne Gallant, continued to be Cooper Institute champions. Des does what all good fundraisers know is most essential: “Just ask”. And Des asked over fifty people! Therefore, including Yvonne’s and Des’ personal donations, we had an extra **\$50,450**, which paid the wages of two part-time staff. The Duffy-Gallant team lets us know in many kind ways that they appreciate us personally and the work that Cooper Institute does in the PEI community. A **special thank you, to Des and Yvonne!**

Irene Burge is responsible for an annual mailout in which she encourages people to sign up as sustaining monthly donors. This effort over the years results in an assured revenue of over **\$18,500** per year which covers our overhead costs. The annual mailout also results in many one-time donations. As well, this year, as in other years, Irene directs donations to Cooper Foundation, which helps to provide long term support for Cooper Institute’s work. **Thank you, Irene!** All the donors are great spirit boosters. Thank you all.

Cooper Institute Fundraising Committee encourages donors to continue with their generosity. With your help we can continue our current work and expand it when needed. Donations can be made by using the “donate” button on our website [www.cooperinstitute.ca](http://www.cooperinstitute.ca). Contributions can also be made in the following ways: pre-authorized monthly donations; an annual contribution; a memorial for a deceased family member or friend; a bequest in your Last Will and Testament. Cooper Institute is a registered charity (Registration #10114 4541 RR0001). For information on donating to Cooper Foundation, which is also a registered charity, contact [ireneburge7@gmail.com](mailto:ireneburge7@gmail.com)

### Members of the Cooper Institute Collective

Eliza MacLauchlan	Maureen Larkin
Irene Burge	Leah MacLeod
Marie Burge	Reg Phelan
Joe Byrne	Selvi Roy
Debbie Theuerkauf	Josie Baker
Irene Doyle	Ann Wheatley
Michelle Pineau	Connor Kelly
Ryan MacRae	

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## Rethinking Canadian Healthcare: Lessons from Cuba

Minister Jean-Yves Duclos was recently quoted as saying, “Most Canadians would agree that even before COVID-19, our capacity was often stretched too thin.” This is true across the country, and especially in PEI, where over 20,000 Islanders await a family doctor, limited specialists are available, public clinics are full within seconds of opening, and emergency rooms are over-capacity. Canada has slowly increased its reliance on the private sector to provide healthcare services. COVID-required services have amplified corporate Canada’s role in the healthcare system. Rapid tests are sold in stores, biotech companies provide PCR testing and vaccines are bought on the market, generating billions for the companies that protect their patents.

Even while living under the US’ crippling embargo, Cuba, a middle-income country, boasts an impressive healthcare system that outshines most of its northern counterparts. Cuba prioritizes its citizens over corporate profit. Cuba has nearly one fifth the GDP per capita of Canada and spends an equivalent one fifth per capita on its healthcare system. Despite this, Cuba hosts 5.3 hospital beds per 1,000 residents, more than double that of Canada’s 2.5 and is home to the most physicians per capita in the world. In 2018, Cuba had 8.4 doctors per 1,000 residents, three times above Canada’s ratio of 2.4 per 1,000. This could be attributed to Cuba’s free, public education system. Cuba also offers residents free dental care and has 38 hospitals dedicated to mental health.

Cuba’s healthcare system flourishes because the state guarantees the collective right to health protection and care under Article 50 of its Constitution. Cuba’s commitment to the well-being of its citizens has better prepared it for the impacts of many crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. On a per capita basis, Cuba has seen fewer infections, hospitalizations and deaths due to COVID-19 than Canada. Cuba holds the third highest vaccination rate in the world at 93%, with 83% considered fully vaccinated, largely due to its nationalized pharmaceutical industry. Cuba is the only developing country to have produced a COVID vaccine, and it has produced five of them. The Soberana 2 vaccine has an efficacy of 92.4% and has been approved for use in Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Vietnam, Iran, Mexico and Argentina. It also doesn’t need to be stored at extremely cold temperatures, making it ideal for distribution in the Global South.

Canada, in stark contrast, completely abandoned its nationalized pharmaceutical industry in the 1980s when it sold the government-owned Connaught Labs to the French company Merieux. While private pharmaceutical companies exist to turn a profit, publicly funded labs provide incredible breakthroughs in medicine. From its beginning in 1913, Connaught contributed to the development of insulin, penicillin, and polio vaccines while supporting the global eradication of smallpox. If Connaught had been developing and producing vaccines at the onset of the pandemic, Canada’s vaccine rollout would have begun months in advance, saving thousands of lives. Instead, Canada’s vaccine supply was met with multiple delays from private suppliers.

Canada has hoarded all the vaccine doses it can buy, preventing market access to the Global South and prolonging the pandemic. It has followed the suit of many wealthy nations who boast about their contributions to COVAX, a global initiative to pool scarce vaccine resources, while simultaneously entering direct contracts with manufacturers to buy millions of doses, causing the exact problem COVAX seeks to fix. Canada’s contributions to COVAX have predominantly been vaccines that are not currently approved for use or cash donations to buy vaccines which don’t exist, due to the supply shortage that it continues to create. Canada has purchased well in excess of what is necessary, with initial vaccine agreements for 404 million doses and amendments for 290 million additional doses from Pfizer and Moderna over the next 3 years. It has supported patent protection for Johnson & Johnson through its refusal to apply for a compulsory license through the WTO to produce 15 million vaccines for the Bolivian government, denying Bolivians a prompt vaccination.

On the contrary, Cuba’s international medical diplomacy has continued to thrive during the COVID pandemic. When a UK cruise ship with 682 passengers was stranded in the Caribbean following a COVID outbreak in March of 2020, Cuba allowed the boat to dock on its shores, giving treatment to ill passengers in local hospitals while allowing others to fly home via Havana’s airport. Cuba has continued to send doctors to struggling regions and has engaged with African states about sharing vaccine technology.

A healthcare system based on profit will always fall short of providing essential services. Canada can learn from this pandemic and look to the examples set by Cuba. Public investment and ownership will lead to a better healthcare system for Canadians and true international cooperation can expand access to care for our neighbours.