

USAID Subversion in Latin America Not Limited to Cuba

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A [new investigation](#) by the Associated Press into a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) project to create a Twitter-style social media network in Cuba has received a lot of attention this week, with the news trending on the actual Twitter for much of the day yesterday when the story broke, and [eliciting comment](#) from various members of Congress and other policy makers. The “ZunZuneo” project, which AP reports was “aimed at undermining Cuba’s communist government,” was overseen by USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). AP describes OTI as “a division that was created after the fall of the Soviet Union to promote U.S. interests in quickly changing political environments — without the usual red tape.” Its efforts to undermine the Cuban government are not unusual, however, considering the organization’s track record in other countries in the region.

As CEPR Co-Director Mark Weisbrot described in [an interview](#) with radio station KPFA’s “Letters and Politics” yesterday, USAID and OTI in particular have engaged in various efforts to undermine the democratically-elected governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Haiti, among others, and such “open societies” could be more likely to be impacted by such activities than Cuba. Declassified U.S. government documents show that USAID’s OTI in Venezuela [played a central role](#) in funding and working with groups and individuals following the short-lived 2002 coup d’etat against Hugo Chávez. A key contractor for USAID/OTI in that effort has been Development Alternatives, Inc. (DAI).

More recent State Department cables made public by Wikileaks reveal that USAID/OTI subversion in Venezuela extended into the Obama administration era (until 2010, when funding for OTI in Venezuela appears to have ended), and DAI continued to play an important role. A [State Department cable](#) from November 2006 explains the U.S. embassy’s strategy in Venezuela and how USAID/OTI “activities support [the] strategy”:

(S) In August of 2004, Ambassador outlined the country team’s 5 point strategy to guide embassy activities in Venezuela for the period 2004) 2006 (specifically, from the referendum to the 2006 presidential elections). The strategy’s focus is: 1) Strengthening Democratic Institutions, 2) Penetrating Chavez’ Political Base, 3) Dividing Chavismo, 4) Protecting Vital US business, and 5) Isolating Chavez internationally.

Among the ways in which USAID/OTI have supported the strategy is through the funding and training of protest groups. This [August 2009 cable](#) cites the head of USAID/OTI contractor DAI’s Venezuela office Eduardo Fernandez as saying, during 2009 protests, that all the protest organizers are DAI grantees:

[¶15.](#) (S) Fernandez told DCM Caulfield that he believed the [the Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigations Corps'] dual objective is to obtain information regarding DAI's grantees and to cut off their funding. Fernandez said that "the streets are hot," referring to growing protests against Chavez's efforts to consolidate power, and "all these people (organizing the protests) are our grantees." Fernandez has been leading non-partisan training and grant programs since 2004 for DAI in Venezuela."

The [November 2006 cable](#) describes an example of USAID/OTI partners in Venezuela "shut[ting] down [a] city":

11. (S) CECAVID: This project supported an NGO working with women in the informal sectors of Barquisimeto, the 5th largest city in Venezuela. The training helped them negotiate with city government to provide better working conditions. After initially agreeing to the women's conditions, the city government reneged and the women shut down the city for 2 days forcing the mayor to return to the bargaining table. This project is now being replicated in another area of Venezuela.

The implications for the current situation in Venezuela are obvious, unless we are to assume that such activities have ended despite the tens of millions of dollars in USAID funds [designated for Venezuela](#), some of it going through organizations such as [Freedom House](#), and the International Republican Institute, some of which also [funded groups involved in the 2002 coup](#) (which prominent IRI staff publicly applauded at the time).

The same November 2006 [cable](#) notes that one OTI program goal is to bolster international support for the opposition:

...DAI has brought dozens of international leaders to Venezuela, university professors, NGO members, and political leaders to participate in workshops and seminars, who then return to their countries with a better understanding of the Venezuelan reality and as stronger advocates for the Venezuelan opposition.

Many of the thousands of cables originating from the U.S. embassy in Caracas that have been made available by Wikileaks describe regular communication and coordination with prominent opposition leaders and groups. One particular favorite has been the NGO Súmate and its leader María Corina Machado, who has made headlines over the past two months for her role in the protest movement. The cables show that Machado historically has taken more extreme positions than some other opposition leaders, and the embassy has at least privately questioned Súmate's strategy of discrediting Venezuela's electoral system which in turn has contributed to opposition defeats at the polls (most notably in 2005 when an opposition boycott led to complete Chavista domination of the National Assembly). The current protests are no different; Machado and Leopoldo López launched "La Salida" campaign at the end of January with its stated goal of forcing president Nicolás Maduro from office, and [vowing to](#) "create chaos in the streets."

USAID support for destabilization is no secret to the targeted governments. In September 2008, in the midst of a violent, racist and pro-secessionist campaign against the democratically-elected government of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Morales expelled the U.S. Ambassador, and Venezuela followed suit "in solidarity." Bolivia would later end all USAID

involvement in Bolivia after the agency [refused to disclose](#) whom it was funding in the country (Freedom of Information Act requests had been independently filed but were not answered). The U.S. embassy in Bolivia had previously [been caught](#) asking Peace Corps volunteers and Fulbright scholars in the country to engage in espionage.

Commenting on the failed USAID/OTI ZunZuneo program in Cuba, House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) [commented](#) that, "That is not what USAID should be doing[.] USAID is flying the American flag and should be recognized around the globe as an honest broker of doing good. If they start participating in covert, subversive activities, the credibility of the United States is diminished."

But USAID's track record of engaging in subversive activities is a long one, and U.S. credibility as an "honest broker" was lost many years ago.

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