

Cuba's Warming Relations with the US May Undermine its Agroecological City Farms

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Cuba is a global exemplar of organic, agroecological farming, taking place on broad swathes of land in and around its cities, write Julia Wright & Emily Morris. These farms cover 14% of the country's agricultural land, employ 350,000 people, and produce half the country's fruit and vegetables. But can they survive exposure to US agribusiness?

Centralised, large scale production systems still exist. But while peri-urban agriculture in other countries may bring conventional agriculture nearer to the city, Cuba is taking its model of organic urban production out to the countryside.

For more than 20 years, Cuba has been developing a sophisticated urban and suburban food system, producing healthy food, improving the environment and providing employment.

But how will the sector survive if the economy opens up to US agricultural and industrial trade and investment?

The first urban farms emerged spontaneously in Cuba out of the hardships of the early 1990s. People in towns and cities began to cultivate urban waste land and keep small livestock as a coping strategy.

Possibly the first co-ordinated effort was the Santa Fe project in the north-west of Havana City, initiated in 1991. Taking advantage of the available resources within the community, empty urban space was reclaimed for food production to help overcome irregular and inadequate food supplies.

The principles of [organic, or agroecological, farming](#) were used to overcome the lack of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. These included making compost from local resources: manure, worm farms and food waste. Here, organic and agroecological farming are synonymous, meaning basically to farm in harmony with nature.

Soon the Cuban government [recognised the potential of urban agriculture](#), and incorporated it into the National Food Action Plan. It offered support by making land available, providing extension services supplying education, seeds and other resources, and organising marketing.

In 1994 the government established a Department of Urban Agriculture, and in 1997 this became the National Programme of Urban Agriculture and part of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Suburban agriculture: the great hope for feeding cities?

The Cuban urban agriculture movement's achievements over the past 20 years were reviewed at the International Conference on Urban and Suburban Agriculture and Family Farming in Havana in April 2015, organised by the International Centre for Fundamental Research on Tropical Agriculture (INIFAT).

It has retained [three basic principles](#): an agroecological approach; the use of local resources; and the direct marketing of produce to the consumer. In 2013 Family Farming was added to the programme.

But there is an increasing emphasis on growing food in suburban (or peri-urban) areas – the agricultural zone just outside the city – which has deeper soils and more available land.

Urban agriculture is limited by space and mainly provides salad vegetables, some fruits, small animals and herbs. However, peri-urban farms can provide the full range of foods – including grains, livestock, and tubers – and remain close enough to deliver fresh produce without high distribution costs.

Data at the April conference showed that the The National Programme of Urban and Suburban Agriculture now covers 12,600 square kilometres nationally (14% of agricultural land), including a belt of 10km around Havana and each provincial capital, 5km around each municipal capital and 1-2km around each settlement of more than 1,000 inhabitants.

In all, the sector has created more than 350,000 jobs, of which just under half are taken by women and young people. In 2013 it produced just over half of total national production of horticultural crops, or 1 million tonnes.

This has enabled a five-fold rise in consumption of fresh vegetables between 1997 and 2013. The aim is to supply 460g of fresh food per person per day, in line with guidelines of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health.

An innovative model – with implications beyond Cuba

Cuba's urban and peri-urban farming represents a clear contrast with centralised and large scale production systems. These still exist to some extent in rural areas of the country, and dominate worldwide.

While peri-urban agriculture in other countries may bring conventional agriculture nearer to the city, Cuba is taking its model of organic urban production out to the countryside.

The Cuban model of urban and peri-urban agriculture is constantly drawing from and adapting foreign methods. The emphasis now is on efficiency and profitability, and there is growing awareness of value chains, multiple stakeholders and differentiated consumers, all of which make it more relevant to the economic and market structures of other countries. Yet it still builds on the main goals of the Cuban system – improving food security and strengthening sovereignty.

The learning and exchange is a two-way process: Cuban-based INIFAT is providing technical assistance on urban agriculture to more than ten countries, mainly in Latin America.

Cuba's unique experience now provides one of the clearest and most advanced examples of how we can sustainably feed the world's expanding cities.

The US opening: threat or opportunity?

But Cuba's urban and peri-urban agroecology model may face a threat from the move towards normalisation of economic relations between the US and Cuba.

US companies are already lining up to export agricultural chemicals and processed foods to Cuba. Soon foreign investors may begin to arrive in search of opportunities for export agriculture.

Cheaper imports, new finance and the development of the agricultural export trade would change the economics of Cuban food production. It would create pressure for changes in farming methods, land use and distribution, and consumption patterns. The drastic impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement on [Mexican smallholder farmers](#) comes to mind.

However, two factors protect the Cuban urban agriculture model.

The first is that it has become well-established. Farmers understand and have committed to agroecological principles, at least in urban and peri-urban zones. On the government side, the model has proven it can achieve development priorities and is enshrined in policy.

The second positive is that the international opening will be gradual. At the conference in April, representatives of Cuban agricultural export enterprises did not appear to be much concerned. One of them, asked what difference it would make to their plans, typified the attitude: "No we haven't been planning anything, we don't know, we'll wait to see what happens."

Full normalisation of Cuban-US economic relations needs the approval of the US Congress and will not happen overnight. The limited US changes introduced so far have encouraged links with US cooperatives and partners for sustainable agriculture, which could strengthen the agroecological model. This slow and evolutionary response may be the most appropriate for now.

But eventually, both farmers and the Cuban government will need to work out how to resist international market pressures. Otherwise the unique, productive model of Cuban urban and peri-urban agriculture may disappear.

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