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Cuba, Policy and Governance

Cuba: Fixing a Broken System

Cuba is located between the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, the largest island in the Greater Antilles. Though surrounded by water, Cuba's area is around 109,820 square km. The island's population is around 10,985,974 people; however, the population steadily decreases by 0.19% per year due to excess deaths and migration. The current government of Cuba is a communist state with heavy involvement in civil society and the economy. The current regime – led by Miguel Díaz-Canel – has been in power since the Cuban Revolution in 1965; the Partido Comunista de Cuba has been in absolute control during this time. Cuba's largest religion is Christianity at 60%, but a large portion of the population also practices folk religion (CIA, 2023).

Considered mostly a tropical savanna climate, Cuba has weather that makes it preferable for the cultivation of tropical crops. Though 18% of the land is arable, Cuba has a sizable agricultural industry (World Bank, 2020). Most of Cuba's agricultural production is tropical crops, including sugar cane, tobacco, and rice. Sugar and tobacco products made up around 80.6% of all Cuban agricultural exports, which shows the limited diversity in Cuba's agricultural sector (IFAD, 2022). However, the cultivation of these crops contributes to under 18% of Cuba's overall GDP. Though a small sector in the economy, agriculture employs 20% of the population, making it a large contributor to Cuba's livelihood on the island (Regmi, 2021). Furthermore, ranching exists in limited capacities on the local level.

In line with the country's production, the average Cuban diet consists of rice, beans, fruit, and some form of cooked and spiced meat. However, staple Cuban foods aren't usually cultivated on the island; rather, food is imported from other nations, most notably the United States. This has accounted for Cuba importing over 80% of its domestic production (WFP, 2022). The Castro regime put heavy emphasis on the family as means of production with small, government approved enterprises. The average household consists of 2.62 family members (Global Data Lab, 2022). With the help of government contraceptive programs, there has been a concerted effort to keep the birth rate low enough to ensure sustainable development. Unfortunately, this aim is one of the prevailing factors for a net-negative population. Cuban women have had more access compared to other Caribbean nations for familial care, but policies limiting cesarean sections have put mothers and children at risk (Padrón Cueto, 2020). Though Cuba has made strides to eliminate gender-based inequality, the prevailing culture of the patriarchy is still common throughout society. Women are burdened with providing money, chores, and food for the family, even though they earn less than their male counterparts.

Formalized by Kennedy in 1962, the embargo in Cuba was meant to deter the Communist revolution from gaining such traction throughout the island. The embargo that is seen today has the same framework as the 1962 deal but is more relaxed for trade and the movement of money to people. However, the basic intention stayed the same – preventing US businesses and citizens from maintaining relations that supported the interests of the Castro regime. This meant that Cuba was cut out from utilizing US financial

institutions for its economy. From the time of the 20th century, Cuba had little economic ties to the US, so its various economic sectors were growing at a slow pace. Fortunately, the Trade Sanctions Reform Act of 2000 allowed US food exports to enter Cuba, under the auspices of Cuban military shell corporations (CBS Miami, 2022). Currently, imported food is handed from a cargo ship to the military, which is then distributed throughout the country through state-operated stores. Since the government holds a monopoly on goods being sold, they can raise the prices enough to gather revenue to sustain state services, without angering people into questioning the regime's legitimacy. The Cuban government also pushed important reforms for Cuba's agriculture through various reform laws. The First and Second Agrarian Reform Laws, in 1959 and 1963 respectively, were created for the government to usurp a majority of control within agriculture (Cuba Platform, 2020). Though the reforms helped centralize control and streamline the distribution of goods, it impeded the growth of private agriculture. For one, it disincentivized a growing marketplace for small farmers, since the land was mostly held by the government. A potential farmer would rather go into guaranteed industrial work than be shut out by the bureaucracy. Another issue is the use of unsustainable farming practices; the government supports monocropping and using copious amounts of insecticide. This eroded soil for land and rendered it useless for further cultivation and made insects resistant to pesticides. Moreover, reliance on tobacco has eroded the soil and depleted it of its nutrients. Coupled with the embargo and unsustainable government policies, current Cuban agriculture has not flourished, which has impacted the health of its people.

For an effective solution to take place, multilateral actions are necessary. First, there needs to be an effective end to the devastating blockade on Cuba. Since the inception of the embargo in 1962, various reforms have taken place in the United States. The largest reforms existed under the Obama Administration; he created bilateral accords that bolstered relations with the US and Cuban private sector (WOLA, 2022). Under the Trump Administration, Trump tightened existing reforms and undid vast amounts of progress. Currently, the Biden Administration has loosened restrictions, including allowing more remittances and visas, but hasn't returned to the levels of Obama (McMillan et. al, 2022). Previous changes to the embargo indirectly affected the agricultural sector. More engagement with the market economy allowed small farmers to bolster production; also, greater remittances led to Cubans spending more on local produce rather than imports. Though American policymakers place blame for the embargo on Cuba's refusal to adhere to democratic norms and economic privatization, the US has complete control of implementation of the embargo. Cuba has no control in enforcing the embargo, rather, they can institute policy changes that would incentivize the US to lift various restrictions. For example, the status quo for journalists and opposition in Cuba is extremely weary. Arbitrary arrests and lengthy detentions are common for those who criticize the regime. In an attempt to sway the US to lift the embargo, the Partido Comunista de Cuba should reduce restrictions on dissent. Having greater opposition and a freer media would show the US that needed reforms for a greater civil society are happening. Such a lift on the embargo would be advantageous for all agriculture in Cuba. Agricultural products could be traded without large-scale restrictions, allowing for private sector support. Moreover, import restrictions could be reduced, making goods that are imported cheaper on grocery shelves.

Another way to increase food access throughout Cuba is to reform the current system of food distribution. Created in 1959, Acopio was meant to centralize control of agriculture with the state through strict crop quotas. When farmers cultivate, the priority of distribution goes to the state (Alvarez, 2004). This allows the government to provide a basic minimum for families, including bread, rice, and sugar. Crops not

designated for families would end up in *Placitas*, state-run market grocery stores (Vidal Alejandro, 2021). Once a farmer has met their quota, they are allowed to sell on private markets. However, the quotas that the government institutes are so high, that farmers are rarely selling away from the government. To fix such problems, there need to be institutional reforms in the Acopio system. First, quotas for crops should be lowered so farmers are given more opportunities to sell in the private market. On paper, lower quotas may reduce food across the board; however, limited quotas help farmers and people in the long run. This would limit the monopoly the government has on goods since it introduces more business to the market and would drive down prices. Moreover, farmers can produce more diverse crops rather than unsustainably mono-crop; this would diversify the food choices in Cuba and help repair damaged soil. Second, the Acopio system should be subcontracted to local groups. Essentially, the government would decentralize the existing system to more localized branches and organizations. For example, farmers won't be limited in which group in the Acopio system they would sell to. This means that farmers are provided an incentive to produce more since there is competition in selling crops. Thus, subcontracting can create sustainable growth within local markets, which means farmers have more opportunities to grow their enterprises. Such subcontracted groups can exist both at the public and private levels. The Acopio can institute local governments to create such groups, whilst also contracting to private organizations made by citizens. To streamline the process of farmers to the government's programs, the Acopio system should be transferred in one currency (Cardoso, 2023). Farmers are paying for their materials in hard money, however, they are getting paid in Cuban pesos. By standardizing the currency, farmers are likely to engage in the Acopio market rather than the black market that is accessible to Cuban people. Though Acopio's leadership has changed, addressing structural problems with the Acopio system would bolster production.

A prevailing issue in Cuba is that the government has isolated a functional private sector. The Revolution signaled that the government would have direct rule over Cuba's economy. This instituted a framework where attempts for domestic private-sector reform were not advantageous for Cuba (Pajón Espina, 2021). However, as thousands of Cubans face malnutrition, fixing this foundational issue allows for more approaches to growth. For reforming this system, looking back on history can provide a good starting point. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin instituted War Communism – a system where the government had control of all aspects of Russia's economy. The system impeded attempts for sustainable growth and led millions to starve. Unfortunately, Cuba wanted to mirror Lenin's idea of achieving immense and quick economic growth. Rather than making the entire economy private overnight, Lenin allowed small privatization. As millions starved, Lenin loosened state control of the economy through reforms allowing small enterprises to enter the private market. Moreover, he allowed individuals' private land to businesses with 20 or fewer workers. While not opening the entire economy, it meant a small private sector could exist, which led to Russians having more access to goods, like crops (Glaza, 2009). For Cuba to reduce hunger, the government should allow greater privatization for smaller agricultural enterprises. Following Lenin's reforms, providing land grants to local agricultural businesses would incentivize greater production. More privatization would allow a more competitive market, which could lower the prices of staple crops across the country. For many facing severe financial issues, they won't have to suffer as much with these changes to greater privatization.

Though systemic changes in the economy are needed, the people that make it run are extremely important. Currently, Cuba's population is net negative, meaning that former job positions are not able to

be filled. In 2022, over two hundred thousand Cubans made landfall in the US, since migration is advantageous for young adults (Vicent, 2022). With limited opportunities, people would rather take treacherous journeys that work in a failing system. The government should collaborate with grassroots efforts to incentivize Cubans to stay and contribute to the economy. During periods of civil strife in the summer of 2021, grassroots organizations, including Centro Memorial Martin Luther King (CMLK) and more, used social media campaigns to donate food and medicine to protesters. Such action shows that coordinated efforts by grassroots organizations can institute changes for younger Cubans. To incentivize young professionals to stay in Cuba, organizations can reach out and provide services that the state doesn't provide. For instance, A Guanajay Ponle Amor located in Artemisia uses Whatsapp and Telegram to connect people to food and medicine in the area (Dominguez et. al, 2021). Other organizations can collaborate with farmers to streamline the ordering and selling of food for people, including those approved by the government. The CDR is a vigilante group that Cubans have to prevent revolution. While the group uses vigilante violence to reduce dissent, the CDR has used campaigns for vaccines and food distribution to the poor. The CDR would have greater access to resources since it is near the government (Goodsell 2023). Having the CDR as a middleman for the distribution of resources could incentivize Cubans who are moving because of economic purposes to stay. Cubans who are in need of current resources would have opportunities to access those resources via the CDR. Another civil society group would be the Catholic Church. The government allows some autonomy to the church, compared to other organizations (Placet 2021). The church can continue operations to help impoverished communities to reduce local poverty. Areas within the vicinity of the church would be most impacted by their distribution, historically areas with greater positivity towards the church. The Catholic Church won't be completely in-charge of the distribution, but they wouldn't be punished for their positive work for helping others. Furthermore, organizations can connect professionals with employment opportunities, like connecting a food scientist to an agricultural enterprise. Such opportunities let people stay since there is hope for creating a life in the future.

As the economy becomes more liberalized, the government should institute agrarian reforms to boost food production. Currently, practices support a culture of monocropping and overproduction. The effect is that the soil is extremely eroded, thereby reducing the production of crops. To maximize growth opportunities, the government should institute reforms to how farming is practiced. An issue is that farmers are focusing their practices on artificial selection – the idea that humans play a direct role in natural selection in plants. While important to maintaining fruitful yields, overuse can lead to a lack of diversity. Without sustained diversity, the quality of crops decreases. In fields, margins are the sides that aren't typically utilized for production. However, field margins can be used to enhance the diversity of farms. Margins could be planted with different crops to create viable hybrids with self-pollination (Mkenda, 2019). To incentivize the transition to more sustainable practices, the government, under the Acopio system, can subsidize farmers with crops they haven't traditionally cultivated. Thereby, curbing the practice of monocropping across the country. Going away from monocropping allows time for eroded soil to gain nutrients, which enhances future growth. Such changes in the practice of farming would directly increase food, thus reducing reliance on imports, and lowering the prices for food across the board.

Another way in which the growing culture could be changed is through organizations utilizing outreach. For many Cuban farmers, they have used their growing techniques for generations, so learning new

techniques would be hard to implement without direct education. Thus, the government should bring farming “influencers” to regions in need of agricultural change. The “influencers” would have the government set guidelines that have easy implantation. Also, the “influencers” education could include teaching farmers how to use their current equipment for the changes, explaining the benefits of planting in the margins, and answering questions farmers have about the new cropping techniques. They would be able to dispel misinformation about the techniques and give tailored solutions to the area's problems. This would allow those who have received the education to teach others about the techniques they learned. Information about sustainable agriculture would spread throughout the island quickly if implemented thoroughly.

Though these solutions should work in conjunction for sizable change in Cuba’s agricultural industries, the solution that should be prioritized is changing the culture of food production. Changing farming practices can happen on the local level the quickest which allows for more approaches to streamlining food production. These changes enhance diversity, which is a starter for sustainable farming in the future. Also, the government would have a higher incentive to support since there aren't direct attacks against its legitimacy. This solution of agriculture changes balances the interests of the government with the benefit to the farmers.

Cuba can be on the path to sustained agricultural growth if these proposed solutions can be implemented, alleviating the suffering that has plagued the country for the past decade. Despite Cuba’s continued isolation from the world, little adjustments to open up economically and politically have had extreme impacts on the island. Government policy and food are inextricably linked, so fixing structural policy problems enables greater approaches to food security for Cuban families.

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