Harper Havick
North Oconee High School
Bogart, GA, USA
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**The Relationship Between Poverty and Food Insecurity in Cuba: A Dissection of Cuba's Great Issue and Possible Solutions**

Sitting between the capital city of Havana and the resort beach of Varadero, the city of Matanzas serves as a cultural hub of Cuba. Known as the city of bridges, Matanzes has long been recognized as a place where poetry, arts, and Afro-Cuban culture could flourish. Here live a middle aged couple who care for their granddaughter, after her mother fled the nation. However, these two have devoted their lives to ministry in Cuba, as they run a local church. The husband serves as the church's president and pastor while the wife maintains the nuts and bolts. They maintain a property on the outskirts of the city; this place is more than simply a church though. This is where they live, host students, garden, keep small amounts of livestock, and even make bread in a quaint bakery. Despite their operation's limited scale, to be in a position like this is certainly rare.

With each passing Sunday, a desperation grows around them. Some members of the congregation manage to pull together a dinner of rice and beans most nights; this serves as a standard meal for Cubans. Others are less fortunate; the church organizes free meals for elderly homeless residents, but worsening shortages may eventually force the program to end. The pair's circumstances cannot keep up with their own generosity. Electrical blackouts have also become increasingly common. In many areas, citizens receive only a few hours of electricity each day, making refrigeration, cooking, education, and communication extremely difficult (Miami Herald). Teachers are often underpaid, and schools consistently lack reliable electricity, causing educational quality to decline as students increasingly rely on the internet and artificial intelligence tools to teach themselves whenever power is available. These conditions demonstrate how economic collapse affects every aspect of daily life, especially food access and security.

Cuba has long been a nation of mixed legacy. Home to 11.02 million people (Our World in Data), the island has been in turmoil in terms of economic and agricultural state for decades. The foundation of the nation has long been sugar,to the extent that Cuba was once the single largest sugar exporter, and still today sugar makes up roughly 70-80% of the nation's export revenue (World Bank Group). Despite the presence of this major industry and others like it, the nation remains in crisis. During the height of the Cold War, the nation turned to communism. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union they have remained a closed autocracy with a command economy, only now without the Soviet backing that previously made the system successful. Now, roughly 45% of Cubans live in poverty (Bahamonde) and 37.8%, or 4.2 million people, are considered food insecure (USDA). While the causes of these harsh conditions are complex, they can largely be traced to economic instability, agricultural inefficiency, political isolation, and decades of strained international relations. Despite the severity of the crisis, several

possible solutions exist based on other nations, and reforms modeled after examples such as Vietnam's Doi Moi policies could prove beneficial for Cuba.

Poverty has become an unfortunate constant in Cuban life as the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused one of Cuba's greatest economic declines (BBC News); the nation has only slumped further as it battles issues like high inflation rates. One of the primary reasons for this downturn is due to government spending and inability to fill that deficit. The goal of a communist economic policy is to create a stateless and classless society. Therefore, in an effort to pursue that economic plan, Cuba began to promote social services and welfare programs, namely bolstering healthcare and education. These programs found immense success, as even today Cuba maintains a 98% literacy rate (World Bank Group) and infant mortality rates and life expectancies that are on par with the United States and Canada (Dramé). Additionally in 1998, President Castro even received the Health-For-All award from the World Health Organization (WHO). Naturally, there has been great ideological controversy, yet these international organizations couldn't help but applaud Cuba's efforts, proving the scope of their success in regards to welfare.

However, when the USSR fell, Cuba's economy fell with it, as nobody was there to financially support these socialist policies. Therefore, the government fell into debt and the nation's citizens suffered for it. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Cuba has quickly turned to one of the poorest countries in Latin America, and it has received very little sympathy from foreign powers, namely Cuba's northern neighbor: the United States. In order to take a stand against communism, the United States placed an embargo on the nation that fully stifled trade between them. The embargo has decimated Cuba, both economically and politically. The United States had the potential to be a valuable trade partner and ally, thus losing their support was lamentable. Yet that alone is barely a fraction of why this embargo is so detrimental to Cuba. When a nation becomes an enemy of the United States, that nation also loses ties to every country associated with the U.S.. This means that everything from UN members, trade partners and other allies of the United States will become increasingly hesitant to work with Cuba, as they don't want to sacrifice their relationship with the United States. Therefore, Cuba is left virtually isolated, with only few nations willing or available to provide any form of aid.

After coming under the rule of communist dictator and revolutionary Fidel Castro, racial tensions in Cuba eased significantly. Castro once claimed that there was no race in Cuba, and rather everyone was simply Cuban giving no regard to black and white. Quickly after he came to power, he removed all forms of segregation. Despite leaps forward made in terms of equality, generational wealth and patterns persist in Cuba, as such a sort of pattern simply cannot be changed overnight. Especially when the economic crisis the nation faces is taken into account, the wealth gap between races grows. In Cuba, some of the best paying jobs are in the tourism industry, as those are some of the few positions that are through private business rather than government owned industry. Additionally, those that work in tourism are closer to food, as well as products like soap, and they may be paid in the more valuable foreign currency. These positions are often reserved for white Cubans, making it increasingly difficult for black Cubans to ever get ahead within the economy. Despite that fact, these issues are pressing across the board for Cubans. It is far more common for Black Cubans to be in positions of greater economic destitution, however most everyone in Cuba is struggling in some form as economic pressures become more prevalent for every citizen.

In recent years, the state of the nation has only declined. Food supplies have become increasingly limited, as the country relies on expensive imports. Cuba imports 70-80% of all of its domestic food (WFPUSA). To an extent, this is expected. The limited resources are a natural component of an island nation. Islands are working with significantly less people, space, climate diversity and neighbors than any land-bound nation. Even prosperous island nations like Iceland still imported more than $967 million in 2024 (International Trade Administration). Furthermore, imports specifically are needed because many foods brought over during colonial Spanish rule and American occupation have become cultural hallmarks, despite the issues in accessibility. One of the primary examples of this is bread. Bread has been a staple food in Cuba since the Spanish brought it over, however wheat does not grow in such tropical climates. Therefore, there is no other option but to import. Cuba's situation is greater than the average island however, given the struggling of their own agriculture. This incredible reliance on foreign markets creates a great burden for the nation as its own agriculture is unable to support itself; this means the island is vulnerable to market fluctuations, which can leave detrimental impacts for the nation's large food insecure population.. The burden of import dependency is not unique; however that does not mean it is not harmfully impacting the lives of Cubans, food insecure or otherwise.

Challenges in imports go beyond simply food, as fuel is incredibly scarce. It is to the extent that the government can not afford to have garbage trucks drive through city streets; as a result, every block is lined with piles of trash. For decades, Cuba's strongest trade relation was with Venezuela. They were both communist countries in close proximity, so it seems natural that the two nations would become strong allies. Additionally, Venezuela is internationally renowned for its access to some of the world's greatest estimated oil reserves. This thereby meant that Venezuelan oil became the easiest, and only, fuel that Cuba had available. However, Venezuela's economic crisis of the 2010s resulted in growing inability to support Cuba. This came to a head in 2026 with the capture of Venezuelan President Maduro. Due to this intervention from the United States, Venezuelan imports to Cuba fully stopped, including Cuba's sole source of fuel. Without fuel, the nation's ability to prosper comes to a screeching halt. Citizens are no longer able to use power tools or farm equipment, have their trash collected, or even travel anywhere beyond walking distance. The lack of fuel is both a burden on day to day operations as well as the overall economy. These major expenses contribute heavily to the nation's state of economic downturn, which trickles down to the poverty of individual citizens.

Worldwide, being impoverished has shown to have a strong correlation with food insecurity, as well as other socioeconomic factors, such as race relations, low education, and marital status. This is a universal connection across the globe, but the tie seems stronger in Cuba.

Agriculture is one of the most essential industries to produce a strong, food secure, economically stable nation. So when examining Cuba's tragic scenario, it should surprise nobody that Cuban agriculture is failing. The most frequent blame for issues on Cuban farms are insufficient livestock feed, poor supply chain, lack of agricultural literacy, and poor quality animals (Miranda, T).

The lack of agricultural necessities puts farmers into a state of detriment. The available livestock feed is poor in both quality and quantity. It is made from scraps, and is still incredibly lacking in regards to amount. This weakens the animals and thus entire livestock operations as it reduces the ability to properly

produce both meat and dairy products. If one cannot support livestock, they are simply unable to reap the benefits of keeping it. One of the greatest unfulfilled needs is in regards to fertilizer. Chemical enhancements are necessary to be able to produce an abundance of premium-grade crops, especially considering Cuba's sandy, rocky and degraded soil. Not to mention, the lack of technology. Cuba is without functioning tractors, combine harvesters and other forms of mechanical equipment. Therefore, farmers are having to resort to primitive tactics like plows pulled by oxen, just to manage their fields. This is more than just an inefficient and primeval way to approach agriculture, it is also a testament to Cuba's destitute state.

Farmers also face difficulties in regards to transportation. Making the bold assumption that a farmer even has a product to sell, the aforementioned incredible fuel shortages make it so there is no feasible method for them to get their goods from their rural farms into the urban marketplaces in cities like Havana. Shortages affect more than just the supply chain however; they actually lead to grave safety issues. Cuba is consistently going days without power, meaning that these blackouts cause the electricity required to power cooling systems to be shut off. This creates danger as key items like dairy products are prone to spoiling when not refrigerated, leaving food inedible. Due to the lack of access to proper storage, people are stuck between a rock and a hard place. They either choose to eat rancid food that will likely lead to grave illness, or the more rational decision to dispose of crucial food supplies.

A lack of agricultural literacy is a deficit in agricultural knowledge, as well as resources and techniques. This issue proves to be a great one in Cuba, as agriculturists struggle within every facet of agricultural literacy. First and foremost, there is a great lack of people who want to go into agriculture. This decline of farmers is a global trend, as technology improves and culture shifts. However, Cuba is being affected by something beyond society's natural gravity, that being the economy. There's hardly a reason for anyone to vie for a job that is not in tourism. Because those jobs are some of the few that are in the private sector, and therefore make significantly more money than just about any other career path. Beyond that, farming is an inherently intense line of work. The idea of doing this grueling job for such little pay entices very few, so therefore the number of Cuban farmers continues to dwindle. Because of this, great numbers of fields are left fully empty, and thus become vulnerable to another threat to Cuba's agriculture. The *Dichrostachys cinerea,* commonly known as Marabou, is a small tree native to Africa that has become a major pestilence in Cuba. In 2016, it was estimated that Marabou weed covered 1.7 million hectares of once productive land. It invades abandoned agricultural land and can limit the productive capacity of farming areas currently in use. It competes for space in protected areas, preventing the establishment of native vegetation. In forests, its presence hinders management and harvesting, significantly increasing costs. (International Model Forest Network) And in the decade since, its presence has only grown. Any Cuban interested in pursuing agriculture despite the previously mentioned circumstances, additionally would have to fight to clear this pestilence, thereby adding yet another hurdle to the occupation.

One of these techniques is artificial insemination which is one of the reasons behind the low quality of animals in Cuba. To simplify the issue, low quality livestock are all that is available and Cuban agriculturists are unable to improve relative quality by substantial margins because of lack of advanced techniques such as artificial insemination. The reason the technique is not practiced is the immense amount of resources and money that it requires, two things that are uncommon in impoverished Cuba. Some attribute the cause of this issue and similar ones to the collectivization of farms enforced by the

communist government. This hurt both Cuban agriculture and the Cuban economy as it enforced bureaucratic plans on farms across the island rather than letting the farmer determine what is best for their land and thus their profits.

These issues in agriculture lead to subpar environmental sustainability practices, which in turn create deforestation and similar phenomena. Soil erosion is common, with more than 40% of Cuban soils being affected by erosion (Ghent University & Universidad Agraria de la Habana), which leads to lower quality agricultural outputs and directly limits agricultural sustainability and thus long-term food security. These environmental problems, combined with economic instability, create a cycle in which food production remains far too low to meet national demand.

The overall state of Cuban agriculture, and even the nation as whole, can be summed up in one word: unsustainable. However, if the Cuban people were to be summed up in one word, it would be: survivors. A defining attribute of Cuban people is their resourcefulness. From keeping 1950's cars still running, to finding ways to make every drop of gasoline count; Cubans know how to do what they can with what they have. The uniquely Cuban ability to persist makes the clear need for reform so much more pressing, because if they are losing hope, then the situation truly must be more dire than the average first-world citizen could even fathom. The need is here, but the action is yet to come.

Focusing on solutions, Cuba may find it more beneficial to model a recovery system after another former soviet partner. In the 1980s Vietnam instituted its Doi Moi reforms, a series of new economic policies inspired by Gorbachev's Perestroika in the USSR; these reforms worked to transition Vietnam from a true command economy to a 'socialist market economy'(Wikipedia). These policies ranged from expanding private industry, to decentralizing economic decisions, to increasing agricultural products and exportable goods. Overall, most consider Doi Moi to be a success, as it greatly reduced poverty and transformed the economy.

The Doi Moi was first introduced to Vietnam in the mid 1980s, a little over a decade after the United States withdrew from the Vietnam war. Despite the outcome, the Vietnam War still left the nation in a state of disarray. The fall of the Soviet Union left the nation in an economic crisis, and harsh trade relations with the United States left Vietnam in a state of despair; a state that bears great similarity to Cuba's experience. So, the Doi Moi was thus created to rectify this issue. This was done with three main objectives; moving from central planning towards markets (with state supervision), developing a multi-sector economy rather than relying on state enterprises and co-operatives alone, and opening Vietnam to the world (VoxDev).

The obvious question that comes to mind is one of logistics, and wondering how exactly a communist government agreed to reforms such as these. Every step forward required intense debate and great persuasion over the senior statesmen who still fundamentally believed in socialism. However, change largely began on the local scale, as leaders of towns and provinces allowed farmers more control of their land. The success that this sparked ended up becoming key evidence that was used to convince stubborn politicians on the national level that this change would be beneficial.

Already, one must admit that Cuba has made several efforts to expand the private sector, with Cuban academics like Richard Torres claiming the private sector is “a necessary evil” (Caribbean Council). This attitude gives this system hope, as glimmers of privatization are already shining through. Despite this fact, more significant expansion would surely be necessary to create a notable difference in the lives of Cuban citizens.

Therefore, when looking at how one could adapt the Vietnamese model to become suitable for modern Cuba, it may be beneficial to instate reforms in regards to agricultural operations. There is much work that needs to be done in Cuba, however the first step should be in regards to farmers. The ability to put food on the table is the most foundational goal of any nation. Simply due to the fact that if they fail to properly provide for the people then they will continue to starve. In that case, there is no point to how wondrous a nation's economy, exports or politics are; if they cannot serve its citizens on the most basic level.

This solution would be the most beneficial because a Cuban version of the Doi Moi would do the best to solve food security at its root, by targeting the economy. Cuba would greatly benefit from decentralization as a whole, specific policies that could be implemented through Cuban Doi Moi along these lines would be opening up more opportunities for private business. Currently retail goods from the private sector make up a mere 55% of the market (Caribbean Council). If this were to be expanded it would further increase the economic development of the nation as it would further stimulate ideas of competition to increase both profit and product, as well as the fact that private businesses can be taxed which means more capital would funnel back into the government to better the economy. The income from these taxes would directly go to funding proper infrastructure. While infrastructure improvements are necessary across the board, it would be most beneficial to have this new tax money go to improvements in agricultural infrastructure and equipment, for example acquiring herbicides and insecticides, improving irrigation systems and other resources. On the other side of that coin, privatization of specifically farms would be highly beneficial as well. Of course, privatization of farms would prove fruitful for similar reasons as the privatization of businesses, with the addition of the fact that it would give farmers control over their farms and would thus be able to implement strategies and systems that work best for their specific operation.

In order to provide a direct incentive to keep Cubans farming and increase their production, Cuba could allow farmers to sell at the market price, rather than one set by the government. This would be very difficult, especially in the beginning, due to the fact that it relies on having a surplus of food which is the case for very few. However, gradually eliminating price controls would allow for further reasoning to produce an excess when possible.

Overall, the key to this “Cuban Doi Moi” would be to complete it in phases. Given Cuba’s state there is no way that all of these reforms would be initially approved to the scale the nation would need. Additionally there’s aspects that are fundamental to the Vietnamese Doi Moi that are unrealistic to consider at this point. However, items like opening up to foreign aid and investing in proper infrastructure, would be ideal to consider after a foundation of improvement has already been laid through the previously spotlighted reforms. Cuba’s situation is unique, and thus its roadmap to progress is as well. However, through borrowing a proven model, slow but steady recovery seems more attainable.

Additionally, when the Vietnamese Doi Moi face criticism, it is most often due to a lack of equitable access to healthcare (International Health). However, Cuba is highly regarded for its advancements in the medical field so when implementing similar programs into Cuba, items like these would not pose as large of an issue for the nation.

Some may argue that a system such as this would completely rearrange the structure of the Cuban government and economy, but rather it would merely transition it. While these reforms would change the nation to more so reflect a market economy, it would remain communist. Many other communist states, such as Vietnam and previously the USSR have made similar adjustments in economic policy while remaining in their same overall system. Cuban authorities would likely insist on maintaining many aspects of communist policy, such as only having one political party, media censorship, and still holding place for centralized business despite an increase in privatization.

In terms of trade, the U.S. embargo still creates issues with this plan in that it would prevent trade opportunities. However, if Cuba implemented these policies then they would inherently be turning slightly from their communist system. Therefore, the United States and its allies may be more inclined to ease policies, just as they did with Vietnam during their Doi Moi reforms.

The main issue with a solution such as a ‘Cuban Doi Moi’ is in implementation. The Cuban government is widely regarded as inefficient, by the nature of being a highly centralized government in a developing country. This means these programs would be incredibly difficult for the government to carry out effectively, if these policies were to be instated. Additionally, by transitioning into a market economy, the government would have to loosen their grip over the entirety of the nation. This likely would not be appealing to the government officials that would have to be the ones to instate these policies, as it would weaken their power and influence. However, if they can recognize the severity of the situation and see the effectiveness of solutions, as leaders did in Vietnam, they may find that policies such as these would lead to the overall betterment of the nation.

Overall, Cuban poverty is complex and wide-reaching with great effects on national food security. The issue has led to incredible economic repercussions and immense struggle for normal citizens in their daily life, especially for the average agriculturalist. Of the possible solutions, the most effective would be modeling a reform system after other nations, namely that of Vietnam's Doi Moi policies. These reforms would work to transition the economy to reflect a more market leaning structure. These would hopefully improve the state of the nation and create a more equitable society for Cuba.

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