



## The Cuban Agrarian Revolution: achievements and challenges<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

After the insurrectionary triumph against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, the Revolution began as a profound transformation of Cuban society, first political, then social, and then agrarian. In fact, the various insurrectionary political programs were committed to transforming the conditions of the Cuban countryside and, more specifically, to agrarian reform, as it appeared in Cuban radical thought and in the constitutional mandate of 1940 (Castro, 1966)<sup>2</sup>. The Cuban agrarian process has therefore been an inseparable part of the history of the Cuban Revolution and one of its fundamental axes.

To study this process, it seems useful to propose a periodization of it:

1959-1963 – period of the first two Agrarian Reforms and the establishment of a state agricultural sector;

<sup>1</sup> Originally written in Spanish under the title “La revolución agraria cubana: logros y desafíos”. The translation into Portuguese is by Diego Molina. The original is available to the reader at IEA-USP for eventual consultation.

<sup>2</sup> The most prominent of these programs is the well-known defense claim of Fidel Castro (1966).



1963-1970 – period of adaptation of agriculture to the new socialist conditions and expansion of sugarcane agriculture, aiming to reach a harvest of 10 million tons;

1970-1975 – period of recovery from the 1970 harvest and extension of the intensive production technological model;

1975-1985 – period of adaptation of agriculture to the New System of Economic Management and Planning (NSDPE after its name in Spanish);

1985-1993 – period of adaptation of agriculture to the campaign for Rectification of Errors and Negative Trends;

1993-2008 – period of recovery from the crisis of the 1990s and a third Agrarian Reform;

2008-present – ongoing period of a fourth agrarian reform and the Municipalization of Agriculture.

These periods were demarcated by the dominant development strategy for each. Here we will examine six of the aspects that characterized their development: i) structure of property and land tenure; ii) land use; iii) organization of agrarian production; iv) science and technology; v) agrarian economy; vi) and rural development.

It is worth noting that the agrarian history of the Cuban Revolution was initially the revolutionary overcoming of the agrarian question that originated in the republican period, characterized by agriculture dominated by large estates, a rural society that was profoundly backward and differentiated from urban society, and a low level of science and technology in agricultural activities. Once the traditional agrarian question had been overcome in its fundamental aspects, the non-capitalist or socialist option (adopted in the early 1960s as a way to consolidate national sovereignty, promote social and economic development, set a lower level of inequality, and establish a popular democracy) would give way to socialist transition strategies aimed at a more just and independent Cuban society. The socialist strategies implemented at that time gave way to the peculiar agrarian question, characterized in part by the high level of nationalization of agricultural activities, low productivity of labor and resources, and food insecurity. Overcoming this “agrarian question” of Cuban socialism determines the ongoing agrarian strategies and their immediate goals.

### **Property structure and land tenure<sup>3</sup>**

As Antonio Garcia taught, the characteristic of latifundary domination is not only the high concentration of land in the hands of a few owners or occupants, but the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Valdés Paz (1997).



consequences of relations of exploitation, subordination and exclusion that were structured from it, as well as the corresponding cultural expression, what he called “the latifundiary constellation”.

The Cuban historical experience corroborates this view. In the 1950s, 57% of the land was in the hands of 3% of the owners, while 78.5% (about 126,000 occupants with less than 5 hectares of land) owned only 15%; and 40% of them were tenants, subtenants or sharecroppers. This structure supported a rural society of wage earners, peasants and unemployed agricultural workers, who were as exploited as they were precarious.

The forces participating in the Cuban insurrection against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista had identified this situation as an absolute priority for a program of justice and social transformation, as expressed in Fidel Castro's defense statement (1966) known as “La historia me absolverá” [History will absolve me], and in Law No. 3 of the Sierra Maestra, which promoted agrarian reform in the liberated territories.

The reform of the land tenure structure was the first major structural transformation enacted by the Revolution in 1959, and since then it has been one of the socioeconomic structures that has been the subject of the greatest number of reforms. Since 1959, we can count four reforms of the tenure structure:

*First Agrarian Reform Law of May 1959*, through which large estates and foreign ownership of rural property were eradicated; all forms of non-proprietary possession were suppressed; and land ownership was handed over to those who worked it, benefiting more than 100,000 peasants. A nationalized agricultural sector was created, administered by the State, which comprised 33% of the country's land.

*Second Agrarian Reform Law*, enacted in 1963, once the socialist nature of the Revolution had been defined within the framework of the political and class struggle of the time. Through this law, all properties larger than 67 hectares were automatically nationalized. The state agricultural sector came to own 66% of the land, becoming the basis for the socialist development of Cuban agriculture.

*1960s, 1970s and 1980s*. Since the second half of the 1960s, there has been a gradual transfer of land from the private sector to the state sector, either through voluntary sales by peasants or through purchases for public use in support of state development plans. These transfers have increased state ownership to 82% of the land.

*Third agrarian reform of 1993*. The agrarian crisis that began in the 1990s (shortages, decapitalization, collapse of the technological model, lack of agricultural labor, etc.) gave rise to the urgent need to redistribute nationalized lands in favor of cooperatives and the peasant sector. This led to a privatization of



the land ownership structure, reducing the State's share from 80% to 40% of the land.

*Fourth agrarian reform, initiated in 2008.* The difficult conditions for the recovery of agriculture on state-owned or recently privatized lands gave rise to a growing reserve of idle land, which presented the urgent need for its redistribution under conditions of usufruct for new peasants, for traditional peasants and for cooperatives with available labor force. The effect of this ongoing process was to reduce the ownership of state lands to approximately 25%, as well as to increase the number of individual occupants, owners of their funds or usufructuaries of national lands.

As we can see, the trend that showed the evolution of the land ownership structure in the country was the historical condition of nationalization of rural property for its subsequent redistribution as private, peasant or cooperative ownership.

## Land use

One of the characteristics of the latifundary constellation in Cuba was the historical pattern of a land area that was 75 to 80% dominated by sugarcane cultivation and cattle raising. In the 1960s, the increase in non-sugarcane agriculture coexisted with the expansion of sugar production in the last years of that decade, favored by the expansion of the cultivated area.<sup>4</sup> But the increase in sugarcane cultivation aimed at sustaining sugar harvests of more than 8 million tons, as well as the expansion of cattle farming, reestablished the traditional pattern of land use until the 1990s, when it was affected by the crisis.

Since the beginning of the sugarcane reconversion in the early 2000s, this land use pattern, which is still dominant, has been deteriorated by the transition of land from sugarcane cultivation to non-sugar agricultural production, cattle ranching or forestry.<sup>5</sup> Cattle ranching and sugarcane agriculture currently occupy only 50% of agricultural land. In turn, the ongoing distribution of idle land for food production should definitely change this historical pattern in favor of non-sugar agriculture.

Precisely, the greatest immediate challenge for land use is to get the existing reserve of idle land to start producing.

## Organization of agricultural production

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<sup>4</sup> Conventionally, agricultural production is classified into: sugar agriculture (*cañera*), non-sugar agriculture (*no cañera*) and livestock production, with their respective subclassifications.

<sup>5</sup> The projected transfer of 1 million hectares would be distributed as follows: 32% for various crops and vegetables; 18% for forestry and fruit; and 50% for cattle raising.



Cuban agrarian organization has evolved in favor of new forms of organization such as state-owned enterprises and cooperatives. A more detailed examination by sector could be illustrative.

### *Producers*

Peasant producers, with areas of 24 hectares on average, were established as individual or familiar producers through the First Agrarian Reform. Their numbers decreased in the 1960s and 1970s, stabilized and increased in number during the cooperative process promoted throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and continued to grow as new usufructuaries in the 1990s and 2000s. Currently, there are records of the existence of more than 300,000 peasants.

Various forms of cooperatives have emerged. The currently existing cooperatives of peasant origin are: a) Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPA after its name in Spanish), collectively owned, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching 40% of the peasantry, but whose number declined for various reasons in the 1980s and 1990s; and b) Credit and Service Cooperatives (CCS after its name in Spanish), a simple form of cooperation in which a number of individual producers come together for certain common purposes. The latter, the most successful in the 1990s and the most popular among peasants, tends to increase with the access of new usufructuary producers.

A particular case is that of the Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPC after its name in Spanish), which originated as a result of the privatization of the 1990s and brought together the majority of state agricultural workers. This is a hybrid cooperative form that has yet to evolve into full cooperation.

In turn, we have the forms of production with which agricultural management was organized in the state sector, for five decades, which were: the People's Farms in the early 1960s; the Farms and Groupings, the Special Plans, in the 1960s and 1970s; the State Agricultural Companies, from the mid-1970s until the end of the 1980s; and the State Farms of the subsisting state sector, from the 1990s onwards. Their main feature is the large scale and the extremely high concentration of resources, as well as the proliferation of second-tier organizations such as unions, business groups, corporations, agro-industrial complexes, etc<sup>6</sup>.

As a result, today we have an organizational panorama of agricultural production dominated by self-managed companies, with a greater weight of cooperative forms in terms of land and number of producers. This situation presupposes new organizational designs for production guarantee activities (supplies, mechanized

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<sup>6</sup> In 1963, 880 farms managed 66% of the country's land; and in 1989, 474 state-owned enterprises managed 82% of the land.



services and transportation, etc.) and technical-scientific services, as well as production marketing.

### *State Management*

The organization of state management over agriculture has also evolved over time, both in its functional structure and in its dependencies: the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA after its name in Spanish)<sup>7</sup> from 1959 to 1975; the Ministry of Agriculture (Minagri) from 1985 to the present day; and the Ministry of Sugar (Minaz), which from the 1980s onwards has integrated sugarcane agriculture to this day, as well as its respective territorial delegations. The greatest challenge currently facing state management over agriculture is to move from a highly centralized administrative management to a decentralized state management, the case of so-called “municipalization” for the following reasons: the organizational scale of all producers is under municipal control; the resources of agroecological production are fundamentally local; and self-managed producers have to measure their management against the market.

Future reforms must overcome the historical contradiction between an essentially territorial activity and a verticalized organization; as well as the tendency to base the organizational design on administrative rather than economic criteria, the tendency to base the organization of management on homogeneous models and, lastly, to establish short-term organizational guidelines.

### **Science and technology**

Since 1960, agricultural development has been accompanied by a parallel development of technical and scientific services for agriculture and basic and applied agricultural research. At the end of that decade and the beginning of the 1970s, in support of development plans based on a resource-intensive technological model, a true technical revolution began in the agricultural sector.

Large budget-funded technical service organizations (institutes, national centers, central laboratories, etc.) were created with a presence throughout the country, as well as territorial units for soil and fertilizer services, hydraulic services, phytosanitary services, veterinary services, artificial insemination services, and others. Several research centers and institutes were also created in different areas and specialties.

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<sup>7</sup> The National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA after its name in Spanish), created in mid-1959 to implement the First Agrarian Reform Law, also played the role of nucleus of the new revolutionary State, initially housing many of the functions and activities that would later characterize it (cf. Valdés Paz, 2010).



This development faced several types of economic constraints, including: the costs of activities were fully covered by the budget, without contributing directly to the costs of companies; the results of research were not incorporated into production practices very well; and their impact on agricultural productivity was insufficient.

A large part of this development of the technical-scientific structure supported the promotion of a resource-intensive technological model integrated by several elements, such as large-scale organization, soil specialization, mechanization, irrigation, the use of agrochemicals, genetic selection, the incorporation of new varieties, etc. This conventional model gradually replaced the traditional model that predominated in the 1960s, and was dominant until the 1990s, when the economic crisis brought down the intensive model and replaced it with an emerging, hybrid model, composed of elements of the intensive model and other agroecological models. This emerging model was favored by the crisis in technical supply, as well as by the rise of peasant production based fundamentally on the traditional model.

The need for a model that would simultaneously guarantee the economic and ecological sustainability of Cuban agriculture favored the widespread establishment of agroecological practices, with the smaller scale of producers, the peasant agriculture model as the most sustainable among the forms of production organization, and an incipient ecological culture in its favor.

### **Agrarian economy**

From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, agricultural development played the role of the “hard core” of national development strategies.

### *Agricultural production*

The agricultural production development policies implemented throughout the 1970s and 1980s were intended to ensure both a steady increase in exports and to respond to the increase in domestic demand. In this regard, there were important achievements:

- the national agricultural area reached 62% of the total area, 13% greater than in 1957, and the cultivated area was 2.3 times greater than that existing in the 1950s;
- the recovery of sugar farming would guarantee, by the end of the 1980s, harvests of between 7 and 8 million tons;
- the diversification and increase in non-sugar farming made it possible to guarantee the rationed supply of food to meet a growing demand. Particular



success was achieved in increasing the production of rice, citrus fruits and tubers;

- in addition, it was possible to ensure a national protein base in meat, milk and eggs, implying a notable development and industrialization of cattle, poultry and pig farming;
- the nutritional level of the population reached in 1989 the real per capita value of 2,845 kilocalories, 76.5 grams of protein and 46.5 grams of fat;
- sugar and non-sugar agriculture managed to steadily increase exports of sugar, tobacco and citrus fruits.

### *Investments*

These achievements were supported by an accelerated process of modernization through productive investments, equipment and the creation of infrastructure, in all agricultural activities. The investment rate in the sector reached 25% of the national GDP between the 1960s and 1970s. This process required a notable and successful effort in training cadres, training the workforce and the massive training of mid-level and higher-level technicians.

The crisis of the 1990s produced an accelerated decapitalization of agriculture, of no less than 50% of basic resources, and a drop in productive investment. This particularly affected the level of equipment and the preservation of resources and facilities. This is one of the restrictive conditions that agriculture will have to face in order to advance in its recovery.

### *The Special Period*

The crisis of the 1990s led to a steep decline in the Agricultural Domestic Product (ADP), which only partially recovered by the end of the 1990s and has been in decline ever since. The conditions and restrictions for the recovery of the sector (decapitalization, lack of workforce, low availability of inputs and energy, inadequate management of natural resources, soil deterioration, etc.) led to a drop in exports and greater food insecurity. Seen from a sub-sector perspective, we can point out:

- a greater, but unstable, recovery of non-sugar agriculture. This allowed for greater diversification of agriculture, as well as the impetuous development of urban and suburban agriculture in the 2000s;
- the failure of the recovery of sugar agriculture failed to ensure the level of sugarcane production predicted for average harvests of 4.5 to 5 million tons;



- livestock farming was one of the sectors most affected by the crisis and the one with the slowest recovery. Cattle production saw their number of heads of cattle halved by the end of the 1980s; and their milk and meat production fell to less than 25% of the previous level. Poultry and pig farming managed to recover to a greater extent and there was a notable increase in sheep and goat production;
- forestry received a strong boost as part of the environmental preservation policy. The national area covered by forests had increased from 13.4% in 1959 to 25.3% at the end of 2007.

### *Marketing*

It began to be organized in the 1960s as a state-run (national and territorial) supply and distribution system. This system was responsible for the purchase, transport, processing and wholesale delivery of agricultural production for industry and for consumption by the population. Livestock production was supplied directly by the food industry.

This system, based on the allocation of resources necessary to perform its functions and the absolute weight of the state sector in agricultural production, began to have lower levels of efficiency until it entered into crisis in the 1990s. The resurgence, in this decade, of the free market, of new intermediaries and the predominance of private production imposed a more complex and participatory conception of agricultural marketing, not without bringing with it tensions and variations in central planning, the guarantee of social consumption and the rationing portfolio, still pending standardization.

### *Current challenges*

The technological and productive achievements of the Cuban agrarian economy left the problems of its inefficiency unresolved, as reflected in the low productivity of resources and labor, as well as the growing need for public subsidies in almost all its sectors. This demonstrated that the Cuban agricultural model was becoming increasingly unviable, both economically and ecologically.

The main causes of this trend were both intrinsic to the agricultural model established since the 1960s (nationalization, centralization, inadequate incentive mechanisms, insufficient monetary-commercial relations, etc.) and external, as in the case of the economic management and planning system (SDPE after its name in Spanish) in force at each period. The crisis of the 1990s made clear both the impossibility of sustaining this model and the urgency of replacing it with another, as well as the need to place it within a new SDPE.



Under current conditions, this new system should incorporate greater autonomy for the business sector, planning complemented by the market, and a strict financial regime. The agricultural model should adapt to this SDPE and should restore the country's agro-export capacity and food security for its population. Among the difficulties that the implementation of a new model will face is the lack of direct labor in the agricultural sector, as well as the lack of resources for most companies.

## **Rural development**

As an absolute priority of the revolutionary program and as an inseparable part of the national development strategy, overcoming the conditions of Cuban rural society was conceived from the very first years. These conditions referred to both the structures of ownership and possession of land and other means of agricultural production, on which the class structure was sustained, and the relations of exploitation, oppression, and exclusion that dominated pre-revolutionary rural society, as well as the absolute and relative backwardness of rural society in relation to urban society.

To overcome these conditions, it was necessary, firstly, for successive agrarian reforms to radically suppress the Cuban ruling classes, large landowners and the agrarian bourgeoisie, as well as the administrations of foreign companies; at the same time, the agricultural proletariat and the peasantry were largely reproduced. The agrarian transformations in general gave rise to a new occupational structure in the Cuban countryside, whose main profiles are: individual producer, cooperative producer, manual worker, laborer, technician, administrative worker, manager, artisan and self-employed worker.

Secondly, the abolition and overcoming of such relationships were the accelerated effect of the Agrarian Reforms promoted in the 1960s and the establishment of a new socialist order in the nation.

Thirdly, overcoming backwardness was largely subject to the general development of the country, but from the very beginning, the political particularities of rural development allowed progress in leveling conditions in the countryside and the city, while the urban areas of most of the country were also the object of development.

The main changes were:

- permanent and seasonal unemployment was replaced by permanent full employment for all rural workers;
- the social policy of the Revolution was extended to all rural areas, consisting of the universal and free distribution of public goods such as



health, education, sports and culture, social security and social assistance. This allowed for rates of health, schooling, sports and cultural consumption and social security similar to those in the cities;

- the population below the poverty line was noticeably reduced;
- an extensive rural infrastructure was created consisting of road systems, electrification, hydraulic systems, housing, social service facilities, etc.

The reduction in the differences between the countryside and the city allowed for greater integration of the rural population into national society. Conversely, certain policies, such as the establishment of secondary education centers in the countryside or the mobilization of urban volunteer workers to carry out productive tasks in the countryside, favored a common national identity and a shared culture.

The reduction of differences between the countryside and the city has allowed for greater integration of the rural population into national society. Conversely, certain policies, such as the establishment of secondary education centers in the countryside or the mobilization of urban volunteer workers to carry out productive tasks in the countryside, have fostered a common national identity and a shared culture.

Despite these advances, the rural population has tended to decline over time, both in absolute and relative terms, increasingly affecting the reproduction of the agricultural workforce. In fact, the workforce has been decreasing with a certain tendency in almost all sectors of production, until recent years, when new policies to stimulate and distribute land have favored the return of direct producers.

Rural development has particularly favored the incorporation of women into social work with greater independence and as protagonists, as well as of young workers, most of whom are qualified workers.

Finally, it should be mentioned that extensive and resource-intensive agricultural exploitation has left its mark on the rural environment, affecting it with greater soil deterioration, water contamination, loss of biodiversity, environmental pollution, etc. Greater ecological awareness and firm environmentalist state policies have made it possible to begin, since the 1980s, to recover from these imbalances, as well as to promote more sustainable practices in the environment and resources.

## **Conclusions**

The history of the Cuban agrarian process, in its different periods, can be characterized as the transition from reforms to an agrarian revolution and, later, from an agrarian revolution to the ongoing agrarian reforms. During this period,



the Cuban Revolution managed to build the foundations of a peculiar socialist agriculture and transform rural society on a more just and participatory basis.

The crisis unleashed in the 1990s on Cuban society, as a consequence of the fall of European socialism, washed away many of the successes accumulated by the agrarian development driven by the Revolution and aggravated almost all of its latent deficiencies. Recovering from these impacts and their consequences is part of the agenda to be resolved. In this regard, the capacity of Cuban agriculture to recover its exports, replace imports and constantly increase the food security of the population is of particular importance.

The promotion of a new agrarian model that allows overcoming the shortcomings and contradictions of the historical model is the greatest challenge. However, a new agrarian model presupposes a new national system of management and planning of the economy.<sup>8</sup>

The agrarian question will continue to be, as it has been, an essential part of the Cuban socialist project. The challenges that this agrarian question poses for the future of Cuban society cannot be faced without a socialist alternative, oriented towards self-government and self-management.

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<sup>8</sup> The outline of a new SDPE or “management model” can be seen in the “Project for aligning the economic and social policies of the Party and the Revolution”, which is open to public discussion and whose final version will be debated at the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), convened for this purpose in April 2011.