

The Cuban Agrarian Revolution: Achievements and challenges

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Introduction

AFTER THE insurreccional triumph against the Batista dictatorship in 1959, the Revolution started as a profound transformation of Cuban society, first political, then social and soon after agrarian. In fact, the many insurreccional political programs were committed to changing the conditions of the Cuban countryside and more precisely to an land reform, as contained in the Cuban radical thought and in the constitutional mandate of 1940 (Castro, 1966).¹

The Cuban agrarian process has therefore been an inseparable part of the history of the Cuban Revolution and one of its cornerstones. Studying this process means referring to a 50-year history, a daring act that escapes the purpose of this essay and for which we have neither the time nor the space required. We propose here the more modest goal of presenting to readers a synopsis of this process, by grouping it in thematic rather than a chronological order. However, it seems useful initially to propose and characterize, within our possibilities, a timeline of the process that serves as a reference for our explanation, as follows:

- 1959-1963 – Period of the first two land reforms and establishment of a state agricultural sector.
- 1963-1970 –Period of adaptation of agriculture to the new socialist conditions and expansion of sugarcane agriculture, focusing on the 10 million tons harvest.
- 1970-1975 – Period of recovery from the 1970 harvest and expansion of the technological intensive production model.
- 1975-1985 –Period of adaptation of agriculture to the New System of Leadership and Planning of the Economy (NSDPE in the Spanish acronym).
- 1985-1993 –Period of adaptation of agriculture to the Campaign of Rectification of Errors and Negative Tendencies.
- 1993-2008 –Period of recovery from the crisis of the 1990s and implementation of a third agrarian reform.

- 2008-present - Current period of a fourth agrarian reform and Municipalization of Agriculture.

As we can see, these periods were marked by the development strategy that prevailed for each of them. As part of all of them, we will review six of the aspects that characterized their development, namely: structure of land ownership; land use; organization of agricultural production; science and technology; agrarian economy; and development of rural society.

It is worth noting that at the beginning, the purpose of the agrarian history of the Cuban Revolution was to find a revolutionary solution to the agrarian issue originated in the republican stage, characterized by an agriculture dominated by large estates, a rural society that was extraordinarily backward and differentiated from urban society, and a low scientific and technological level of agricultural activities. Once the traditional agrarian issue had been settled in its fundamental aspects, the non-capitalist or socialist option (adopted in the early 1960s as a path towards the consolidation of national sovereignty, socio-economic development, the establishment a lower standard of inequality and the introduction of a people's democracy) would lead to socialist transition strategies oriented to a more just and independent Cuban society. The socialist strategies implemented at that time gave rise to the peculiar agrarian issue, characterized in part by the high level of nationalization of agricultural activities, the low productivity of labor and means, as well as food insecurity. The solution to this "agrarian issue" of Cuban socialism determines the agrarian strategies in place and their immediate goals.

We shall examine below some of the topics of its path.

Structure of land ownership and tenure²

As Antonio Garcia used to teach, the characteristic of the domination of large landed estates is not only the high concentration of land in the hands of a few owners or occupants, but also the consequences of relations of exploitation, subordination and exclusion stemming from it, and the corresponding cultural expression, that which he called "the constellation of landed estates". The Cuban historical experience could only but corroborate this view. Thus we can see that in the 1950s, a structure of land ownership characterized by land concentration showed that 57% of the land were in the hands of 3% of owners, while 78.5% (around 126,000 occupants with less than 5 hectares of land) were held by only 15%; and 40% of them as tenants, subtenants, partners or hold-over tenants. This structure supported a rural society of wage earners, peasants and unemployed agricultural workers, who were heavily exploited as hold-over tenants.

In those years, the forces participating in the Cuban insurrection against the Batista dictatorship had identified this situation as the highest priority of a social justice and change program, as expressed in Fidel Castro's statement of defense (1966) known as "La historia me absolverá", and in Law No. 3 of Sierra Maestra, which promoted a land reform in the liberated territories.

In fact, the reform of the land ownership structure was the first major structural change implemented by the Revolution in 1959, and since then one of the socioeconomic structures subjected to the greater number of reforms. Since 1959, four reforms have been introduced to the land ownership structure, which can be summarized as follows:

First Agrarian Reform Law of May 1959, which eradicated landed estates and foreign ownership of rustic property; eliminated of all forms of non-proprietary ownership; and gave ownership of the land to those who worked it, thus benefiting over 100,000 peasants. Its enforcement, under conditions of severe internal and external struggle, gave rise to a nationalized agricultural sector managed by the State, which comprised 33% of the country's land.

Second Agrarian Reform Law, which was enacted in 1963, once the socialist character of the Revolution had been defined in the context of the political and class struggle of the time. This second Law provided for the automatic nationalization of all properties or buildings with more than 67 hectares. With it, the state agricultural sector gained ownership of 66% of the land, becoming the basis of the socialist development of Cuban agriculture.

Evolution of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. From the second half of the 1960s there was a gradual transfer of land from the private sector to the state sector, for reasons of voluntary sales by peasants or purchase for public service, in support of state development plans. These transfers increased ownership by the state sector to 82% of the land.

Third Agrarian Reform of 1993. The agrarian crisis which began in the 1990s (shortages, decapitalization, collapse of the technological model, lack of agricultural workforce, etc.) brought about to the urgent need to redistribute nationalized land in favor of cooperatives and the peasant sector. This led to a privatization of the ownership structure, reducing its share from 80% to 40% of the land.

Fourth Agrarian Reform initiated in 2008. The difficult conditions for agricultural recovery in state or recently privatized lands gave rise to a growing stock of idle lands, raising the urgent need for their redistribution under usufruct conditions to new peasants, traditional peasants and cooperatives with workforce availability. The effect of this process still in progress was to reduce the ownership of state lands to approximately 25%, as well as increase the number of individual occupants, fund owners or beneficial owners of national lands.

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

Land use

One of the typical features of the constellation of landed estates in Cuba

was the historical pattern of occupation of 75% to 80% of the land by sugarcane plantations and cattle breeding. In the 1960s the increase in agricultural production other than sugarcane coexisted with the expansion of sugar production in the last years of that decade, boosted by the increase in the cultivated area.³ But the increase in sugarcane production aimed to sustain sugar harvests of more than 8 million tons, as well as the expansion of cattle ranching, reestablished the traditional land use pattern until the 1990s, when it was affected by the crisis.

Since the beginning of the sugar conversion process in the early 2000s, this land use pattern, which still prevailed, became deteriorated due to the conversion of sugarcane production land into land for non-sugar agricultural production, cattle rearing or forests.⁴ Indeed, cattle breeding and sugarcane production currently occupy only 50% of agricultural land. In turn, the current distribution of idle land for food production should definitely change this historical pattern in favor of non-sugar agriculture.

The biggest immediate challenge for land use lies precisely in getting the existing stock of idle lands to start producing.

Organization of agricultural production⁵

The successive land reforms and agricultural development strategies of each period have influenced the evolution of the Cuban agrarian organization, on behalf of novel forms of organization such as state enterprises and cooperatives. A more detailed examination by sector could be illustrative.

Producers

Peasant producers with areas of 24 hectares on average were affirmed as individual or family producers through the First Agrarian Reform. Their number decreased in the 1960s and 1970s, stabilized and increased during the cooperativism process fostered during the 1970s and 1980s, and continued to grow as new beneficiaries in the 1990s and 2000s. In fact, records currently indicate the existence of over 300,000 peasants.

Various forms of cooperatives have emerged, with different fates, since the 1960s. Cooperatives of peasant origin currently in operation include: a) Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPA) collectively owned and established during the 1970s and 1980s, which covered as much as 40% of the peasantry and decreased by various causes throughout the 1980s and 1990s; and b) Credit and Services Cooperatives (CCS), a simple form of cooperation in which a number of individual producers gather for certain common purposes. This latter form of cooperation, which was the most successful in the 1990s and the first choice of peasants, tends to increase as a result of the accession of new beneficiary producers.



The mission of the brigades in 1970 was to achieve the record harvest of 10 million tons of sugar

A particular case is that of cooperatives originated among agricultural workers, as a result of the privatization of the 1990s, known as Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPC in the Spanish acronym). These cooperatives gathered most state agricultural workers. It is a form of hybrid cooperative that still needs to evolve to full cooperation.

In turn, we have the forms of production in which agricultural management was organized in the state sector for five decades, namely: the People's Farms in the early 1960s; the Farms and Clusters, the Special Plans in 1960s and 1970s; the State Agricultural Enterprises from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s; and the State Farms of the remaining state sector from the 1990s onwards. The main feature of state agricultural organizations is the large scale and extremely high concentration of resources, as well as the proliferation of second-tier organizations such as unions, business groups, corporations, agribusiness complexes, etc.⁶

As a result of the particular developments described here, today we have an organizational scenario of agricultural production dominated by self-managed companies, with a higher weight of cooperatives in terms of land and number of producers. This scenario entails new organizational designs for the activities aimed at ensuring production (supply, mechanized services and transportation, etc.) as well as technical-scientific services and product marketing.

State directorate

Also worth mentioning is the organization of the state directorate in relation to agriculture, which has also evolved over time in terms of both its functional structure and facilities: National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA)⁷ from 1959 to 1975; Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI) from 1985 to date, and Ministry of Sugar (MINAZ), which since the 1980s has taken over sugarcane agriculture, as well as their respective territorial delegations. The biggest challenge facing the state directorate of agriculture is to switch from a highly centralized administrative directorate to a decentralized state directorate, the case of the so-called "municipalization". This "municipalization" seems to benefit from the following reasons: the organizational scale of all producers is under municipal control; the resources of an agro-ecological production are essentially local; and self-managed producers must measure their management vis-à-vis the market.

Future organizational reforms in agriculture will need to overcome the historic contradiction between an essentially territorial activity and a vertical organization; as well as the propensity to base the organizational design on administrative rather than economic criteria; the tendency to base management organization on homogeneous models; and finally define short-term organizational agendas.

Science & Technology

Since the beginning of the land reform process in the 1960s, agricultural development has been accompanied by a parallel development of technical-scientific services for agriculture and by basic and applied agricultural research. Late in that decade and early in the 1970s, a true technical revolution was introduced in the agricultural sector, both in services and in agricultural research, to support the development plans based on a resource-intensive technological model.

In fact, large organizations of technical services were established with budget funding (institutes, national centers, central laboratories, etc.), with presence throughout the national territory, territorial units of soil and fertilizer services, and hydraulic, phytosanitary, veterinary and artificial insemination services among others. Several research centers and institutes were also created in different areas and specialties.

This development of technical-scientific resources to support the agricultural sector faced economic constraints of different natures, including: the costs of the activities were fully covered by the budget, with no direct contribution to the costs of the companies; research results had a low level of incorporation into production practices; and their impact on agricultural productivity was insufficient. Indeed, much of the beneficial effect of the technical-scientific resources used as services or inputs served to mitigate the lack of manpower or the decrease in productivity.

Much of this development of the scientific-technical structure supported the promotion of a resource-intensive technological model formed by various elements, such as large-scale organization, soil specialization, mechanization, irrigation, use of pesticides, benefit for products, genetic selection, incorporation of new varieties, etc. This conventional model gradually replaced the traditional model prevailing in the 1960s, and more rapidly in the 1970s. This model was in effect until the 1980s, when the economic crisis toppled the intensive model and replaced it by an emerging model, hybrid in nature, composed of elements of the intensive model and other agroecological models. This emerging model was favored by the technical supply crisis, as well as by the rise of a peasant production based mainly on the traditional model.

The need for a model capable of guaranteeing both the economic and ecological sustainability of Cuban agriculture promoted the widespread implementation of agroecological practices, favored by the smaller scale of producers, the model of peasant agriculture as the most sustainable among the forms of production organization, and an incipient ecological culture.

Agrarian economy

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

Agricultural production

The development policies implemented in agricultural production over the 1970s and 1980s should both ensure a steady increase in exports and meet the growing domestic demand. In this aspect there were important achievements:

- The national agricultural area reached 62% of the total area, 13% higher than in 1957, and the crop area was 2.3 times larger than that existing in the 1950s.

- The recovery of the sugar agriculture started in the second half of the 1960s would ensure harvests between 7 and 8 million tons by the end of the 1980s.

- Diversification and the expansion of non-sugar agriculture enabled ensuring rationed food supply to meet a growing demand.⁸ The increase in rice, citrus fruits and tubers production was a particular success.

- In addition, a national level of protein supply was ensured - from meat, milk and eggs - which covered much of the basic needs of the entire population. This entailed a remarkable development and industrialization of cattle, poultry and swine breeding.

- In 1989, the nutritional status of the population reached 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 succeeded in constantly increasing sugar, tobacco and citrus exports.

Investments

These achievements were underpinned by an accelerated process of modernization through productive investment, equipment and development of infrastructure in all agricultural activities. Between 1960 and 1970, the rate of investment in the sector accounted for 25% of national GDP. This process required a remarkable and successful effort in personnel development, workforce training, and massive training of secondary and higher education technicians.

The crisis of the 1990s produced, among other effects, an accelerated decapitalization of agriculture of not less than 50% of the basic means, and a decline in productive investment. This affected particularly the level of equipment - for lack of replacement or obsolescence - and the preservation of resources and facilities. This is one of the restrictive conditions that agriculture will have to face to move forward in its recovery.

The Special Period

The crisis of the 1990s produced a sharp drop in agricultural domestic product (AGDP), which was recovered only in part in the late 1990s and has declined since then.⁹ 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.) have



House in Ignaza, Vale de los Ingenios, Cuba.

influenced the decline in exports and increased food insecurity.¹⁰ Seen from the sub-sectors, we may point out:

- A greater but unstable recovery of non-sugar agriculture. This allowed a greater diversification of agriculture, as well as the rapid development of urban and suburban agriculture in the 2000s.

- The failure in the recovery of sugar agriculture. The sugar conversion started in 2002 failed to ensure the level of sugarcane production expected for average harvests of 4.5 to 5.0 million tons.

- Livestock was one of the sectors most affected by the crisis and the one with the slowest recovery. Cattle showed the worst performance, with a 50% reduction in the existing herd by the end of the 1980s; and milk and meat production fell to less than 25% of the previous production. Poultry and swine succeeded in recovering to a greater extent, and there was a remarkable increase in sheep and goat production.

- Forestry received a strong boost as part of the environmental preservation policy and to offset the serious impacts on forest areas in the country in decades before and after the revolutionary triumph. The national area covered by forests had increased from 13.4% in 1959 to 25.3% by late 2007.

Marketing

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

This system based on the allocation of funds required for performing its functions and on the absolute weight of the state sector in agricultural production began to experience lower levels of efficiency until it went into crisis in the 1990s. Its recovery was prevented by conditions contrary to those that originated it. Incidentally, the reemergence in the 1990s of the free market, new brokers and the predominance of private production imposed a more complex and participatory conception of agricultural marketing, but not without bringing with them tensions and variations in the central planning, in the guarantee of social consumption and in the rationing portfolio, which is still pending normalization.

Current challenges

The technological and productive achievements of the Cuban agrarian economy in the first three decades left unresolved the problems of its inefficiency, seen in the low productivity of means and labor, as well as in the growing need for public subsidies in virtually all its sectors. This showed that the Cuban agricultural model was becoming increasingly unfeasible, both economically and ecologically.

The main causes of this trend were both intrinsic to the agricultural model implemented in the 1960s (nationalization, centralization, inadequate incentive mechanism, insufficient money-commodity relations, etc.) and external, as in the case of the Economy Management and Planning System (SDPE in the Spanish acronym) prevailing in each period. The crisis of the 1990s showed not only the impossibility of sustaining this model and the urgency to replace it with another, but also the need to include it in a new system of economic management and planning.

Under current conditions, this new system should incorporate, among other things: greater autonomy of the business sector, planning complemented by the market and a tough financial regime. The agricultural model should adjust to this SDPE or “management model”. Precisely, this new model will be responsible for recovering the country’s agro-exporting capacity and the food security of its population.

Among the difficulties facing the implementation of a new model is the absence of a direct workforce in the agricultural sector, as well as the lack of resources by most companies. When this model is defined in all its components, policies to overcome these difficulties will need to be implemented.

Rural development

Overcoming the issues facing the Cuban rural society was a top priority of the revolutionary program and an inseparable part of the national development strategy. These conditions referred not only to the structure of land ownership and tenure and other means of agricultural production that supported the class structure and to the relations of exploitation, oppression and exclusion that prevailed in the pre-revolutionary rural society, but also to the absolute backwardness of rural society in relation to urban society.

Overcoming these conditions required, first of all, implementing successive land reforms that radically suppressed the Cuban dominant classes, landowners and the agrarian bourgeoisie, as well as the administrations of foreign companies; at the same time, the agricultural proletariat and peasantry proliferated on a large scale. In turn, the agrarian transformations in general gave rise to a new occupational structure in the Cuban countryside, the main profiles of which are: individual producers, cooperative producers, manual workers, blue collar workers, technicians, clerical workers, managers, artisans and independent workers.

Secondly, the elimination and overcoming of these relations were the accelerated effect of the land reforms promoted in the 1960s and the establishment of a new socialist order in the nation.

Thirdly, overcoming backwardness depended largely on the general development of the country, but from the outset the political articulations of rural development enabled leveling conditions in the countryside and the city, while the urban areas of most of the country were also subject to development.

The transformations that over time stemmed from this rural-urban leveling policy can be summarized as follows:

- Permanent and seasonal unemployment was replaced by full permanent employment for all rural workers.
- The social policy of the Revolution, which entailed the universal and free distribution of public goods such as health, education, sport and culture, social safety and social assistance, was extended to all rural areas. This enabled achieving levels of health, schooling, sports and cultural consumption, and social safety similar to those of the cities.
- The number of people living below the poverty line has decreased notably. These people are now considered as part of the assisted population.

An extensive rural infrastructure made up of road systems, electrification, hydraulic systems, housing, social services facilities etc, has been created.

The decrease in the differences between the countryside and the city has allowed greater integration of the rural population to national society. Conversely, certain policies such as the establishment of secondary education centers in the countryside or the mobilizations or volunteer urban workers to perform productive tasks in rural areas, has promoted a common national identity and a shared culture.

Despite the advances achieved in leveling the urban and rural areas, over time the rural population has shown a downward trend in both absolute and relative terms, increasingly affecting the reproduction of the agricultural workforce. In fact, the workforce had shown a downward trend in almost all production sectors until recent years, when new incentive and land distribution policies promoted the return of direct producers.

Rural development favored in particular the incorporation of women in social work with greater independence and as protagonists, as well as of young workers, mostly as skilled labor.

Finally, we should mention that a resource-extensive and a resource-intensive agrarian exploitation has left its mark in the rural environment by affecting it with greater soil degradation, water pollution, loss of biodiversity, environmental pollution, etc. Greater ecological awareness and strong state environmental policies have enabled starting, from the 1980s, the recovery of these imbalances, as well as the implementation of sustainable practices concerning 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 agrarian reforms underway. In this course, the Cuban Revolution has succeeded in building the foundations of a peculiar socialist agriculture and transforming rural society on a more equitable and participatory basis.

The crisis unleashed in 1990 over Cuban society as a result of the fall of European socialism led to the loss of many of the successes accumulated by the agrarian development driven by the Revolution and aggravated almost all its latent deficiencies. Recovering from these impacts and their consequences are a topic on the agenda yet to be addressed. In it the ability of Cuban agriculture to recover its exports, substitute imports and constantly increase the food security of the population is of particular relevance.

The promotion of a new agrarian model that enables overcoming the shortcomings and contradictions of the historical model is the biggest challenge. However, a new agrarian model entails a new national system of economic management and planning.¹¹

The agrarian issue will remain, as it has always been, an essential part of the Cuban socialist project. The challenges posed by the agrarian issue for the future of Cuban society cannot be met without a socialist alternative oriented to self-government and self-management.

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Notes

- 1 The most prominent of these programs is Fidel Castro's famous statement of defense (1966).
- 2 See Valdés Paz (1997).
- 3 Conventionally, agricultural production is classified as: sugar (*cañera*) agriculture, non-sugar (*no cañera*) agriculture and livestock production, with their respective sub-categories.
- 4 The transfer projected over a million hectares would be distributed as follows: 32% for various crops and vegetables; 18% for forest and fruit; and 50% for cattle farming.
- 5 See Valdés Paz (2010).
- 6 In 1963, 880 farms managed 66% of the national lands; and in 1989, 474 state-owned enterprises managed 82% of the lands.
- 7 The National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA in the Spanish acronym), created in mid-1959 for the implementation of the First Agrarian Reform Law also played the role of center of the new revolutionary State, performing initially many of the functions and activities that would characterize it later on (see Valdés Paz, 2010).
- 8 The rationed distribution of agricultural and industrial products, still in force, was established in 1961 in order to ensure equal consumption by the population under conditions of rapid increase in demand at the beginning of the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba and the fall in production. The instruments for this purpose were the Consumers Registry and the so-called portfolio of "Sales control for products...".
- 9 The agricultural product in 2000 was 125% that of 1993; in 2005, it was 90% that of 2000.

- 10 The guarantee of nutrients for the population fell in 1993 to 50% of 1989 levels. With the subsequent recovery, a level of 2,362 kilocalories, 59.4 grams of protein and 41 grams of fat was achieved in 1999, which were lower than the required minimum; however, levels of nutrient intake per capita of 3,246 kilocalories, 88 grams of protein and 65 grams of fat had already been achieved in 2005, exceeding those needs, except for fat, and higher than those of 1989.
- 11 The outline of a new SDPE or “management model” can be seen in the “Project of Alignments of the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution” open for public discussion and whose final version will be discussed at the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), convened for that purpose for April 2011.

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Abstract – After the triumph of the revolution in 1959, a profound transformation of Cuban society began – first political, then social and, very early on, agrarian. The Cuban Revolution surmounted the agrarian issue that had originated during the republican phase and embodied a socialist option for socioeconomic development (of which agricultural development was a fundamental part). Cuban socialism’s efforts to resolve the “agrarian issue” determined the strategies currently in force and their immediate goals. As part of this process, we examine six aspects that characterize the Island’s sociopolitical development: the structure of land ownership, land usage, the agrarian organization, the technological model, the agrarian economy, and the development of rural society.

Keywords: Cuban agriculture, Agrarian revolution, Agrarian model, Development, Agricultural production.

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