Cuban Land Reform

Sugar has been Cuba’s principle agricultural crop since the colonial period. Beginning during that time, a well-to-do class of landowners accumulated large estates (called latifundios) that produced sugar, livestock, and fruit. Even after the Spanish-American war and the end of the colonial era, foreign interests, especially from the United States, owned significant tracts of land and invested large sums of money in latifundios’ operations. This process drove up the production of sugarcane for export, but marginalized the small-scale campesino (peasant) farmers, who focused on more diversified crops. By 1958, 73.3% of Cuba’s available farming land was concentrated in the hands of just 9.4% of landowners.¹

In reaction, land reform was a top priority of the Cuban Revolution, and fair land distribution and management remain pillars of the Cuban ethos. Today, the country continues to explore how to utilize and distribute land in a way that will maintain a vibrant small-farming class, while adapting to the changing economy and the population’s needs for a healthier and more diversified diet.

The first and second land reforms

In May 1959, the new revolutionary government introduced the First Agrarian Reform Law as one of the first major structural changes of the Revolutionary era. As Fidel Castro explained in his famous History will Absolve me speech, agrarian reform was intended to increase the overall prosperity and health of the nation by equalizing land distribution and providing the campesino class with economic opportunities and an acceptable standard of living.² The law eradicated latifundios, nationalized all foreign-owned rural property,³ transferred land to campesinos who had previously worked it without titles, and created a state agricultural sector to maintain control of around a third of national farmland.⁴

The Second Agrarian Reform Law, introduced in 1963, further decreased the allowable size of private farms by nationalizing all property holdings over 67 hectares, thus giving the state control of around two thirds of all national farmland.⁵ Over the decades that followed, the state gradually took ownership of more tracts of land, eventually coming to own 82% of active farmland by 1988.⁶

Whereas the first agrarian reform law focused on giving more power to small, independent farmers, the second came at a time when the state was moving toward increased centralization and state control of farm land, following the Soviet model. The state also implemented a supply-distribution model at this time, in which the government provided each territory with agricultural supplies to distribute among state and cooperative farms.⁷ This system helped to usher in the use of high-technology, high-input farming methods, which improved agricultural infrastructure and increased production of sugarcane and other large-scale crops.⁸

However, this model also had troubling drawbacks. While gross levels of Cuban production reached greater heights than ever in the decades leading up to the 1990s, productivity of both labor and means (resources, infrastructure, and tools/machinery) fell. Cuba’s dependency on chemicals required escalating use of inputs,
which in turn led to increasing erosion, degradation, and other ecological problems. Additionally, for all its agricultural progress, Cuba had largely failed to address the issue of dependence: although it was no longer dependent on Spain or the United States, the country was reliant on the USSR to purchase production and supply inputs. These two factors made Cuba’s agricultural sector very vulnerable to external forces.

**Small farmers and cooperatives**

In 1961 the government supported the creation of the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) as a civic, mass organization to link independent farmers, integrate them into the Revolutionary structure, and act as a vehicle for their interaction with the state.

Beginning very early on in the revolutionary period, the government encouraged small farmers to join cooperative structures, and commissioned two types, both of which would fall under ANAP authority:

- Cooperatives for Credits and Services (CCS) were founded in 1975 for farmers who maintained private ownership over small, individual farms. Through the CCS they were encouraged to form associations for marketing and financial services (such as machinery, chemicals, and bank benefits).
- Cooperatives for Agricultural Production (CPA) were founded in 1977 for farmers who agreed to pool their land into a single unit, over which they shared collective ownership and responsibility.

These farms and the ANAP structure remained a bastion for *campesino* livelihood and culture throughout the following decades, even as they occupied the minority of Cuban farmland. However, they were considered to be less productive than state farms, and were allocated fewer of the imported fertilizers, technology, and pesticides that drove production on large, industrial state farms.

As long as the Soviet Union remained Cuba’s principal sugar market and supplies provider, it was possible to overlook these shortcomings. However, after the fall of the USSR in 1989, Cuba was thrust into an extremely difficult economic position, which necessitated major rethinking of the land distribution model.

**The Special Period: challenges and decentralization**

With the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s exports and imports both plummeted. The USSR’s willingness to pay prioritized rates for Cuban sugar, and to send subsidized imports, machinery, and food goods, had served as Cuba’s economic lifeline. When this support evaporated, Cuba faced intense shortages, and was confronted with the inherent unsustainability and inefficiency of import-dependent state farms, which—even before the collapse—had been requiring increasing levels of inputs and becoming increasingly productive in terms of resource-to-output ratios.

Cooperative agricultural farms and small-scale farmers, previously thought of as less modern and efficient, proved to be the most resilient and adaptive in the face of economic changes, which they demonstrated by
restoring traditional agricultural methods and innovating new low-input techniques (see *Food and Agriculture* entry). Noting this, in 1993, the government implemented what is often thought of as a third agricultural reform in order to decentralize production and support small farming. The hallmark of this reform was the handing over of many state farms to their workers, who became the new collective owners of Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPCs), modeled after CPAs.

The government also noted the need to make land available to citizens who had not previously worked it, or who had left their family’s farms behind previously in favor of office or factory jobs. New policies for urban agriculture turned unused urban land over to neighborhood residents, whom Raul Castro encouraged to develop self-sufficiency in food production. In 2008 the government took another step to move idle land into the hands of small farmers. Law Decree 259 (updated in 2012 with Law Decree 300) allows Cuban citizens to gain “usufruct rights” (long-term use rights) to unused tracts of agricultural land up to 13.42 hectares in size. The law can be invoked by landless citizens who wish to become farmers, or by farmers who would like to expand their farms. Since implementation, this law has facilitated the distribution of more than 1.7 million hectares to more than 200,000 farmers. In order to further expand the distribution of idle land, the government revised the laws in 2017 to double both the amount of land to which citizens can gain access, to 26.84 hectares, and the duration of renewable use rights, from a period of 10 to 20 years.

**Current challenges**

The Special Period forced Cuba to re-examine its model of land use and production, and to consider a more agroecological and decentralized alternative. However, there is still a lack of consensus surrounding which model to embrace in the future. At present, significant areas of land are still farmed conventionally, with some pesticides and fertilizers, even as an innovative, agroecological sector continues to grow.

Moreover, a need remains to move the 883,900 hectares of uncultivated agricultural land into active production, and to recruit young farmers to re-populate rural areas, where the populations are aging rapidly. Adding to the challenge, many young people are skeptical about the quality of life in the countryside and the strenuousness required to work the land (often overgrown with invasive plants) with limited machinery—a fact which demonstrates that the problem is not only one of policy, but also of culture and social factors.
 MANAGEMENT OF AGRICULTURAL LAND BY SECTOR *

**STATE**

Usufruct 21.17%

Individual Owners 11.94%

CCS 0.54%

CPA 8.07%

**NON-STATE**

66.29%

**STATE**

33.71%

**NON-STATE**

24.54%

*ONEI, “Panorama Uso de la Tierra.” Cuba 2016. Edición Junio 2017


2 Ibid., 8.
3 In return for seized land, the Cuban state offered payment in 20 year currency bonds. However, many who fled to the U.S. did not receive payment, and this remains a point of contention in the Cuban exile community.
5 Ibid., 75.
8 Ibid., 76, 85.
9 Ibid., 82-83.

10 Ibid., 10.
11 "Historia de la ANAP." Portal ANAP Cuba: Revista ANAP. http://www.revista.anap.cu/?page_id=1351
12 "Historia de la ANAP." Portal ANAP Cuba: Revista ANAP. http://www.revista.anap.cu/?page_id=1351
14 Ibid., 4-5.
15 Ibid., 82.
20 Ibid., 17.
24 Nova 2004 Op Cit