

## Cuba: So close but so far away

I have always felt that one cannot look at U.S. agricultural policy in isolation from events in the rest of the world. To that end, I have used this column to share with you information we uncover on what is happening in countries like Argentina, Brazil, and China. Recently, we took a look at the possible interrelationship between sheep and wheat production in Australia.

In this column, the spotlight is on Cuba. The source of the information that follows is a report by Oxfam America that looks at what happened to agricultural production in Cuba after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1990. In the decades before the breakup and under the pressure of the U.S. embargo, Cuba had become increasing dependent upon trade with the Soviet Block. Much of Cuba's agricultural sector was fully mechanized and oriented toward the production of sugar for the export market. In exchange for sugar, Cuba received food, fertilizer, equipment, and fuel.

By the early 1990s, that import/export relationship had begun to collapse and Cuba was facing a crisis. With no imports of parts, fuel, fertilizer, herbicides or pesticides, mechanized farm equipment sat unused as crops rotted in the field unharvested. With significantly decreased imports of foodstuffs, the daily per capita caloric consumption of the average Cuban dropped from 2,908 to 1,863, well below the World Health Organizations recommended level of 2,700 calories.

With the loss of its major trading partner, Cuba could not turn to other markets, say the U.S., because of the embargo. In addition Cuba was not eligible for help from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, both of which help developing countries around the world.

Isolated from both its former trading partners and from much of the rest of the world, Cuba began to institute some internal reforms to ensure that it could provide food for its citizens. Out of necessity, Cuba abandoned its highly mechanized, high-input export oriented agricultural practices.

Cuba also began to reorganize the agricultural sector by breaking up large state run farms into smaller cooperatives, although land ownership remained with the state.

The decision making process was brought down to the cooperative level. Urban agriculture was supported and encouraged as people took empty lots and began to use them for vegetable production. Because Cuba did not have access to chemical inputs much of Cuba's new agriculture is organic.

Farmers were given the opportunity to sell into a variety of markets instead of the single state market as before with the state offering a range of prices by quality-grade for each product. As a result, production has begun to flourish.

To be sure, there are still problems, but since the depths of the crisis, the average per capital caloric intake of the average Cuban has risen to 2,585. Fresh fruits and vegetables are once again available in the markets. Instead of focusing exclusively on production of an export crop, a significant portion of the Cuban agricultural sector has reoriented itself toward the production of the domestic market. Small scale family and cooperative enterprises have been strengthened.

A copy of the complete Oxfam report can be obtained on their website (<http://www.oxfamamerica.org/publications/art1164.html>) or call 1 800 776-9326, ext. 464 and ask for a free copy to be mailed to you.

Cuba still has sugar to export and a recent trade fair was held as Cuba seeks supplemental food imports. Several major U.S. farm groups have been working to reopen normalized trade with Cuba in the hope that U.S. producers might provide those food imports. Should normal trade again occur, Cuba may be faced with the trade-off between continued progress in improving domestic agricultural productivity and importing large quantities of the food products that can be more cheaply obtained from the U.S.

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