

Bringing Cuban agroecology to the next level

Over the past three decades, the Cuban people have made great strides in scaling out and up the practice, science and movement of agroecology. This is often celebrated as an example. However, the adoption and durability of agroecology have been uneven across space and time. Recent policy reforms are laying the groundwork for the greater spread of agroecology across the entire food system on the path to food sovereignty.

LEIDY CASIMIRO, MARGARITA FERNANDEZ AND GIRALDO MARTIN

In this article, we briefly highlight some of the key programmes and policies that enabled agroecology to take hold in the early years of this transition. Then we describe the more recent reforms – including work towards a national public policy for agroecology.

The need to achieve food self sufficiency

Since Spanish colonisation, Cuban agriculture prioritised extensive monoculture production for export rather than production for food self sufficiency. This objective was achieved through the aggressive exploitation of people and natural resources. The Cuban Revolution of 1959, led by Fidel Castro, marked a political-economic shift towards a socialist government, prioritising science, education and social solidarity.

This led to a well-informed society, with strong research and agricultural institutions. The conventional agricultural approach was strengthened, with support from the Soviet Union, and in the 1980s Cuba had the highest use of pesticides, fertilisers and tractors in all of Latin America and the Caribbean.

It was not until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the consequent economic crisis, that the vulnerability

of the conventional, export-oriented agricultural system became evident, and a shift towards national food production for greater food sovereignty became a matter of national security.

This economic crisis opened a political space that generated transformations in the agrifood sector with the objective of achieving food sovereignty, including: agrarian reforms, decentralisation of agrifood system planning to the municipal level, a national programme of urban agriculture, and the development of a Peasant to Peasant Movement with a decentralised structure that facilitated a horizontal exchange of knowledge, experiences and practices among the peasants themselves.

As a result of land reform policies at this time, there was a shift in agricultural land management from 80% state-owned in the early 1990s to over 70% – approximately 3.5 million hectares – in the hands of cooperatives and family farms today.

The national 'Urban, Suburban and Family Farming Programme' ensured availability and access to local, fresh and nutritious food in the cities. The Campesino a Campesino Movement, organized by the National Association of Small Farmers, is an impressive programme



Photo: Leidy Casimiro

Workshop on agroecology and permaculture at the biodigester of the Finca del Medio farm in the province of Sancti Spiritus.

that has ensured that more than half of the Cuban peasantry, some 200,000 families, participate in a complex and continuous process of training and learning.

Cuban agroecology has developed in a fragmented way, rather than as a conscious transformation of food systems

Many of these policies and initiatives are the result of bottom-up processes, driven by peasant families and the collective action of various institutions and researchers. However, it is important to note that Cuban agroecology has developed in a fragmented way, as a series of adjustments and substitutions rather than a conscious transformation of food system governance.

In fact, Cuba remains dependent on food imports, and the government continues to invest primarily in conventional agriculture. In the period from 2015 to 2018, investments in

conventional agriculture exceeded US\$ 3 billion, and 61% of Cuban food was imported. Despite there being political will in favor of decentralisation and agroecological transitions, it is difficult to move from discourse to practice after so many years of a conventional top-down approach.

The policy puzzle of decentralised decision making

In recent years there have been changes in the country's political-legal framework that favour the practice, management and governance of agroecology for food sovereignty, although still in a fragmented manner. Political, economic and social reforms as outlined in the 'Guidelines of the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution' (2011) and the new Constitution (2019) prioritise local development and grant more decision-making power to municipalities.

But after decades of highly centralised, top-down public governance, this transition is slow and requires training, awareness, transformations and innovations in governance and management, whereby citizen participation is increased and multi-actor and intersectoral platforms are an integral part of local governance. Some of these plans, strategies



Photo: Leidy Casimiro

Workshop on food cultures at the Finca del Medio farm.

and laws include a Municipal Development Strategy, a Policy for Local Development, a Climate Change Plan (Tarea Vida), a national policy on the use of bioproducts, programmes for the conservation of natural resources, incentives for soil conservation, and a new law on cooperatives, among others.

After decades of highly centralised governance, the transition is slow and requires innovations to increase citizen participation

A recent policy achievement is the 2022 Food Security and Sovereignty and Nutrition Law, which obliges the state to ensure healthy and adequate food for its population. This law emerged from a joint FAO and European Union initiative that began in 2017 and used a participatory approach to formulate multisectoral food policies and integrate them into the government's sectoral plans and legislation.

The National Plan for Food Sovereignty and Food Security, which preceded this law, was prepared by 12 ministries, 150 technical experts and research centers, 11 NGOs, and 12 state enterprises. It includes policy recommendations for food sovereignty organised around

four priority themes: reducing dependence on food imports and agricultural inputs; promoting food quality, safety and waste reduction; consolidating territorial food systems; and mobilising educational, cultural and communication systems around healthy eating.

However, this Plan and Law have little weight without an accompanying agroecology policy. An agroecology policy would provide the methodological and practical support to realise the aspirations of the Food Sovereignty Law.

Making a public policy for agroecology

The continued expansion of agroecology at the territorial and national levels requires the establishment of a public policy explicitly based on general agroecological principles that guarantee that the entire process, from field to table, is effective, sustainable, inclusive and resilient.

To do this, in 2023 a panel of diverse experts and professionals conducted an integrated assessment of the advances and barriers of agroecology in the country, looking at the technological, environmental, economic, scientific, educational, sociocultural and political dimensions.

A key barrier they found is the poor understanding of agroecology among decision makers and the public, and the lack of an agroecological approach in the training of professionals, government officials and scientists working in agriculture-related fields. Another barrier is the deterioration of rural conditions and livelihoods and a lack of

Principles to guide the development of a public policy on agroecology in Cuba

- The creation, revitalisation and conservation of rural livelihoods by providing favorable conditions for sustainable agricultural production, including a reduction in dependence on external inputs, the promotion of appropriate technologies for harnessing renewable energies, and the strengthening of socio-ecological resilience and a circular economy.
- Horizontal partnerships between farmers, researchers and educators for the exchange of knowledge, skills and innovations leading to ecosystem conservation.
- Greater integration of agroecosystems, creating synergies and complementarities that contribute to diversified sources of agricultural income.
- The promotion of local production, distribution and consumption networks that connect farmers and consumers and are based on trust and marketing at fair prices.
- The facilitation of ecological functions in agroecosystems, the incorporation of appropriate methodologies to address technological and socio-environmental complexity, and the recognition of ethics as a fundamental and transcendental value.
- The promotion of transdisciplinary and holistic food systems research that integrates local and peasant knowledge and cultures.
- Contribution to healthy, diversified, seasonal and culturally appropriate diets.
- Respect for gender, generational, racial, sexual and religious diversity, and the promotion of solidarity, social engagement and opportunities for rural, urban and culturally diverse people.
- Deepening self-esteem, sense of belonging and community empowerment by dignifying livelihoods and increasing socio-economic resilience.
- Decentralised governance and flexible local management of food systems.
- The articulation of a set of complementary public policies and the incorporation of their principles into the national education system.

recognition of the efficiency of family farming and peasant agricultural systems and their value to sustainability and food security.

In addition, a systemic approach to agrifood systems governance and management is lacking, and links between farmers and consumers are weak. Finally, the national certification system for agroecological production is not being implemented, and there is inadequate infrastructure for equipment, services and inputs to facilitate agroecological transitions.

Based on this assessment, the panel proposed, as an urgent next step, the creation of a legal space to articulate and implement a public policy on agroecology in Cuba. They suggested a set of principles as the basis for constructing this agroecology policy (see box above).

As a result, a decree-law is expected to be approved before the end of 2024. This public policy includes: financial incentives; the promotion of solidarity consumption to strengthen the link between producers and consumers; local certification schemes based on Participatory Guarantee Systems; and the incorporation of circular economy systems

and agroecological tourism to generate employment and boost local economies, among others.

As such, the public policy on agroecology offers a new cross-cutting institutional framework that can respond to the ongoing social, ecological, economic and food crises as a result of the economic blockade, as well as the imminent challenges of climate change.

This means a groundbreaking public policy on agroecology is emerging. About 30 years of national experience with agroecological transition will be integrated into a policy framework that can accelerate a transformation of social and ecological processes in Cuba, contributing to sustainability and food sovereignty rooted in local identity and culture. ■

Authors: **Leidy Casimiro** works at the Universidad de Sancti Spiritus and Finca del Medio, Cuba. **Margarita Fernandez** is the director of the Caribbean Agroecology Institute, USA/Cuba. **Giraldo Martin** works at the Estacion Experimental de Pastos y Forages Indio Hatuey, Cuba. Contact: leidy7580@gmail.com