

# A lesson in sustainability from Cuba

With its vintage Studebakers, crumbling colonial architecture, and ubiquitous portraits of Che Guevara, Cuba often seems like a country mired in the past. But I went to Cuba recently to see the future – our future – some version of which Cuba has already lived. In 1991, the disintegration of the Soviet Union triggered a calamity Cubans call *el periodo especial*, “the special period”. Cuba’s economy had been propped up by the Soviet bloc’s cheap oil and purchases of Cuban sugar. The Soviet collapse precipitated a massive food and energy crisis, during which transportation ground to a halt, power outages became endemic, and Cubans’ average daily caloric intake dropped by a third.

Isolated from conventional markets, Cuba’s response was to take some enviable strides toward sustainability. The government converted sugar cane plantations to other crops or pasture and encouraged urban gardens on unused state land. Much of this new agriculture was, by necessity, organic, relying on natural pest control and manure-based fertilizers. Elderly farmers were roused from retirement to teach college-educated agronomists how to yoke oxen. Cuba invested in every kind of public transport, including enormous buses capable of carrying 300 passengers. It bought a million bicycles from China and formalized a system of hitchhiking in state-owned cars.

I was eager to go to Cuba to witness this, the first great national experiment in sustainability the world has ever seen. I went with a question: assuming the US trade embargo ends and Cuba fully rejoins the global economy, will it abandon its newfound ways or continue toward sustainability?

What I found was only partly encouraging. To be sure, the crisis has eased since the dark days of the mid-1990s. Cuban nutrition has rebounded; even the street dogs look well fed. Many workplaces provide shuttles for their employees, and well-stocked produce markets fill the gaps in the government ration system. Power blackouts are less frequent, and streetlights are regularly lit.

These improvements partly result from “enlightened” approaches. For instance, Cuba spent wisely on energy efficiency, replacing ancient refrigerators and fans with modern models, and converting all household lighting to compact fluorescents. Urban agriculture turned everyone into locavores. Plugging water leaks and treating sewage with constructed wetlands have helped save power, and Cubans are increasing their renewable energy capacity. But the improvements are also due to a return to some of the same old, unsustainable practices. Cuba now imports cheap oil from Venezuela and has expanded domestic fossil-fuel exploitation. About 80% of its food is still imported, some of it expensive delicacies destined for tourists; a visitor searching for sustainability may end up dining on farmed shrimp from Vietnam.

Ultimately, it was the bikes that convinced me that sustainability in Cuba – and perhaps everywhere else in the world – will only go as far as necessity pushes it. I constantly asked Cubans what had happened to all those Chinese bicycles. I assumed Havana would be a bike mecca, but in the 9 days I spent there, I saw only a handful of cyclists.

The answers I received varied. It’s popular to blame problems on the US embargo, so some cited a lack of spare parts, an argument made implausible by the ingenuity of Cuban mechanics working on 60-year-old Fords. Others said the bikes were too heavy, or blamed a lack of bike parking and bike lanes. Finally, one Cuban gave me a more credible answer. “Look”, he said. “It’s 38°C here in the summer. Nobody wants to go to work sweaty. We rode bicycles when we had to. Now we don’t have to. That’s all.” It wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I’d like to believe that the logic of sustainability is inexorable – that once you’ve gone green, you never go back. But Cuba teaches us a different lesson. Yes, change is possible, and it can be rapid, but for it to be lasting, it must improve people’s quality of life, rather than worsen it.

Cuba’s command economy was able to put a million bikes (or fridges) in people’s hands practically overnight, and the urgency of its need meant it could take drastic, far-reaching measures. In the US and Europe, we won’t have these “advantages”; we’ll proceed with a mixture of regulations and incentives to guide us. As we choose how to wean ourselves off of petroleum – giant wind farms? electric cars? fluorescent bulbs? – we must remember Cuba’s example, and put our money into measures that can’t be readily circumvented by that natural human tendency to take the easy way out.



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