Reframing Food Sovereignty in Eastern Cuba: Informal Economies and the Pursuit of Adequacy Among Small-Scale Farming Communities

by

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Abstract

In response to the current economic and humanitarian crisis in Cuba, causing widespread food scarcity, this study explores how small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba respond to food inadequacy through alternative and informal food systems. Drawing on 6 weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023 and 2024, the study examines how participants employ strategies such as unsanctioned production, black market engagement, and grassroots mutual aid networks to reclaim control over their food systems, working towards a culturally and nutritionally adequate diet. While Cuba has been celebrated for its agroecological practices and state-led food sovereignty programming, this research reveals a lived reality of scarcity and economic hardship among small-scale farming communities in the Eastern provinces.

The study therefore argues that the prevailing food sovereignty discourse does not accurately reflect the agency of farmers working outside of formally recognized economies. Participants' stories reveal engagement with a diversity of informal economies to resolve food inadequacy, embodying a form of food sovereignty that is not reflected in policy-oriented discourse. In response, this analysis calls for a reframing of the current discourse to more accurately reflect the moral contradictions and agency of small-scale farmers as they actively seek to improve food access and posits that a framework of adequacy is fundamental in bridging food sovereignty discourse with lived practices in the context of Eastern Cuba. Thus, the experiences of the small-scale farmers in this study are presented as a critical lens through which the limitations and contradictions of current food sovereignty narratives may be assessed.

Key Terms:

Food Sovereignty, Food Adequacy, Cuba, Small-Scale Farming, Informal Economies, Food Security

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Introduction

The concept of food sovereignty was first popularized by the international peasant organization *La Vía Campesina* in 1996 and speaks to "the right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures, and environments" (Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010, 2). Food sovereignty aims to move beyond food security to incorporate notions of adequacy and cultural importance, taking a critical stance against capitalist industrial agriculture systems. The food sovereignty framework seeks to empower communities to shape their food systems in a way that reflects their needs and values by centering small producers, often highlighting grassroots movements in rural communities that strive to reclaim community-based methods of production and distribution.

Within food sovereignty discourse, Cuba has often been upheld as an example of success in state-led food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture policy (Gürcan 2014) and peasant agriculture and localized food sovereignty efforts are viewed as taking place "within the revolution" (Thiemann and Spoor 2019). However, the current economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing U.S. trade embargo, has caused intense food scarcity throughout the country and pushed an increasing percentage of the population to engage with alternative methods of food acquisition through informal (and often illegal) economies (Espina 2025; Boudreault-Fournier and Gauthier 2024). Cuba's rapidly changing socio-economic and political situation calls for a re-examination of food access and adequacy in the post-pandemic context.

Cuba's economy is heavily centered around Havana, in the west, meaning that the east is not only hit hardest by the ongoing economic crisis, but has frequently been overlooked by researchers. This study addresses this scholarly void through an exploration of the current lived realities of small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba and their efforts towards mitigating food scarcity

and inadequacy. This study draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in rural farming communities of eastern Cuba in 2023 and 2024 to explore how participants navigate the complex intersection between formal and informal methods of food acquisition and production. I will first discuss the dominant discourse on food sovereignty, highlighting its critiques, and reviewing its scholarly applications within Cuba to date before exploring findings on experiences of food (in)adequacy among participants. The results of this study address the diverse ways by which participants seek to improve food inadequacy by engaging with informal economies. I conclude by highlighting how these experiences may complicate the prevailing food sovereignty discourse.

The following study examines how small-scale farmers navigate food inadequacy and challenges dominant narratives that not only falsely portray Cuba as a success story in top-down food sovereignty policy but also fail to account for informal economies within grassroots food sovereignty strategies more broadly. Findings thus complicate the current discourse by illustrating how small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba engage in alternative food acquisition strategies beyond official state structures. This study highlights the diverse nature of the strategies that participants employ, arguing that food sovereignty discourse must holistically account for the agency of small-scale farmers in non-capitalist settings, and outside of formally recognized economies. Through this analysis, the study contributes to a broader re-evaluation of food sovereignty discourse, advocating for further ethnographic research that prioritizes local agency and lived experience of food access, acquisition and adequacy.

Food Sovereignty: A Theoretical Framework

Food sovereignty is often contrasted with food security, which was defined at the World Food Summit of 1996 as entailing that “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to

sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary need and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle" (Goeury 2024, 228) Discourse aiming to differentiate the two often describes food security as primarily concerning itself with patterns of distribution, while food sovereignty is more closely tied to methods of production (Fairbairn 2010; Wald and Hill 2016). This dichotomy can be extended to hold that food security discourse remains rooted in large-scale agricultural systems—commonly seen as the only way to effectively feed a global population—while food sovereignty aims to distance itself from industrial agriculture through its basis in civil society organization and peasant resistance (McMahon 2014, 121-22). However, in practice, the two are highly connected and food sovereignty cannot begin to be addressed without an in-depth understanding of the factors driving or inhibiting food security in the small-scale farming communities that build the basis of food sovereignty efforts.

Current discourse on food sovereignty remains tied to a critique of neoliberalism, framing it as an alternative to capitalist agriculture systems (see McMichael 2014, 348-49; Bello and Baviera 2010). But what about food sovereignty from within a non-capitalist state, such as Cuba? The current literature on food sovereignty in Cuba states tends to take a top-down approach, discussing the role of the socialist state and failing to explore ongoing grassroots efforts coming from within (see Menser 2014). In the case of Cuba, grassroots food sovereignty efforts can arguably be seen as a resistance to shortcomings of the state-implemented ration program, presenting an alternative framework to reductive narratives that attribute food sovereignty to mere peasant resistance against capitalist agriculture.

Critiques against global food sovereignty discourse call attention to the implications of lumping peasants, small farmers, agroecologists, and others under one "homogenous other" vis a vis large agriculture, essentializing them and reducing individual identity and autonomy

(Bernstein 2014). Labelling small-scale farmers as “capital’s other” implies a deliberate resistance to industrial agriculture and a conscious decision to embrace agroecology as an alternative. However, this oversimplifies the complexities of their decisions and neglects the broader socio-economic and environmental factors that shape their practices (Bernstein 2014). The choice to practice subsistence farming can rarely be boiled down to such black and white decisions of “good” or “bad” farming practices and instead depends on a myriad of culturally contextual experiences, including economic restraints and political dynamics. A political economic approach is therefore necessary, as many small farmers participate in secondary economies, engaging in what Bernstein refers to as "micro-capitalism." This reality complicates the idealized notion of self-sufficient, subsistence farming and highlights the economic pressures faced by small farmers in a globalized context (Bernstein 2014).

Post-Revolutionary Agricultural Models in Cuba

While food sovereignty programming is often criticized as portraying an unattainable utopia (Wald and Hill 2016), Cuba has frequently been purported as a relative “success story” of state-wide food sovereignty programming and agroecology (Gürcan 2014). Following the 1959 revolution, Cuba adopted a monocrop model that focused on sugarcane production for export, and the country relied heavily on the Soviet Bloc for imports and agricultural support (Thiemann and Spoor, 2019). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba faced a severe economic crisis known as the "Special Period," which led to widespread food insecurity and malnutrition (Schultz, 2012).

To address this new issue of food insecurity, agrarian reforms were passed in 1993 that shifted from external reliance on imported food stuffs to domestic food production through a temporary land access program that allocated land to Basic Units of Cooperative Production

(UPBCs) (Schultz 2012). These reforms did effectively mitigate national food insecurity at the time and shifted Cuba closer towards a domestic model of food production, thus prompting international attention as a "lighthouse" example for food sovereignty programming at the national level (Wright 2008; Gürcan 2014; Thiemann and Spoor 2019).

In 2008, the Cuban government implemented the Usufruct Land Access Program, which further redistributed idle agricultural land with the aim of fostering family-based farming. Theoretically, this should have marked a further step toward a more sustainable, family-farm-based agriculture. Yet, Theimann and Spoor (2019) note that most of the land remains idle, with production stalled due to a lack of resources such as tools and agricultural inputs, and in 2009 President Raul Castro declared food security an issue of national security (Schultz 2012). Due to ongoing rhetoric regarding this state-led approach to food sovereignty, peasant agriculture and localized food sovereignty efforts are still viewed as taking place "within the revolution" rather than as acts of resistance (Thiemann and Spoor 2019), a perspective which diminishes the agency of farmers striving to improve food security independently of the state.

While Cuba continues to have very low rates of malnutrition, Cubans experience intense food insecurity through scarcity, price barriers, and difficulty of acquisition, especially in the eastern region of the island (see Garth 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated conditions of food insecurity, and Ruiz et al. (2022) reported that residents of the province of Santiago de Cuba experience difficulty in accessing sufficient food, resulting in greater food vulnerability. To address growing food shortages, the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture (MINAG) passed the "National Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Education Plan (SAN)" *(Plan Soberanía Alimentaria y Educación Nutricional)* in July 2020, listing the strengthening of local food systems as one of its main goals. However, as Garth (2021) notes, the rationing system has

increasingly fallen short, and residents continue to cite a reduction in quality, quantity, and cultural adequacy of state-provided food.

Applying a Framework of Adequacy

While the concept of food sovereignty has long been framed as a resistance to capitalist agricultural systems, the case of Cuba offers a unique opportunity to explore how food sovereignty functions within a non-capitalist context. Cuba's food sovereignty efforts, shaped by both state-led reforms and grassroots initiatives, reveal the complexities of navigating food security and sovereignty in a socialist framework. While Cuba has made historical progress in addressing food insecurity through state-led programming, the challenges faced by small-scale farmers—ranging from resource scarcity to inadequate state support—highlight the limitations of top-down approaches. Furthermore, understanding food security in Cuba requires an examination of the lived experiences of farmers, whose agency is often overlooked in dominant discourses that equate their efforts with mere extensions of state policy.

The importance of food studies in the Cuban context cannot be overemphasized. As argued by Dawdy (2002, 49), "…food has been a measure of Cuban well-being, not only in terms of individual nutrition, but also in terms of national political and economic wellbeing. It has been an essential medium through which Cubans measure their social standing and quality of life." (Dawdy 2002). Food forms a fundamental part of Cuban conscience and dialogue, and approaching food access through a framework of adequacy can account for the multi-dimensional importance of food that goes beyond simple nutrition to incorporate social, political and economic well-being (Garth 2020, 5). Garth introduces the idea of the "decent meal," which speaks to not just sufficiency, but reflects adequacy and cultural expectations of a certain standard of living (37). Understanding the factors that constitute food adequacy is thus key when

critically assessing food sovereignty, as food systems may support nutritional sufficiency but preclude the deeply contextual elements that support a culturally appropriate and "decent" meal. While Garth (2020) explores how individuals negotiate food inadequacy through strategies of acquisition in an urban context, a framework of adequacy may also be extended to assess diverse modes of production, thus centering the small-scale farming communities that form the backbone of food sovereignty discourse.

The recent economic pressures exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the urgent need for an updated, nuanced understanding of food security in Cuba that considers both structural challenges and the localized, peasant-driven resistance that continues to shape the island's food systems. However, there has been very little ethnographic work conducted in Cuba since the COVID-19 pandemic, and no literature applying qualitative methods to address food access and adequacy in rural farming communities in Cuba. Cuba is undergoing rapid change, leaving a significant gap in understanding how small-scale farming communities negotiate food adequacy in times of scarcity. Furthermore, Cuba's unique combination of state-led reforms and grassroots food sovereignty initiatives highlights the complexities of implementing alternative agricultural frameworks in a non-capitalist context, offering a critical perspective on the strengths and limitations of both top-down and bottom-up food sovereignty approaches in achieving sustainable food systems.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore how small-scale farmers negotiate between formal and informal methods of food production and acquisition in Eastern Cuba. The research was generally guided by the questions of *What does food adequacy mean in the current socio-political and economic context of Eastern Cuba?* and *How do the lived*

experiences of small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba inform and challenge mainstream discourse on food sovereignty? to investigate how small-scale farmers in the region navigate both state-led and informal food systems in the context of ongoing economic challenges. By engaging directly with farmers through fieldwork conducted in 2023 and 2024, this study highlights the ways participants exercise agency to resolve food inadequacy through diverse strategies.

This study was approached inductively and manifested through emergent design from the outset, which accommodated for unexpected circumstances and allowed the focus to unfold in closer alignment with the participants' concerns (Campbell and Lassiter 2015, 32). Research was conducted under the guidance of Dr. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier and Dr. Mélissa Gauthier of the University of Victoria, in conjunction with the Department of Anthropology's Ethnographic Field School. Participants were existing contacts and collaborators of Dr. Boudreault-Fournier, and their involvement in this study therefore fell within the parameters of the Research Ethics Board approval obtained for the field school.

A total of six weeks of fieldwork were conducted in Eastern Cuba during the months of June and July of 2023 and May and June of 2024. Fieldwork was based in Santiago de Cuba and conducted during short trips to rural communities in the Gran Piedra and Sierra Maestra mountains of the Santiago de Cuba and Granma provinces, and near Baracoa in the Guantanamo province. All conversations and interviews were conducted in Spanish. Audio recordings and fieldnotes were transcribed and thematically coded using Taguette, and I have translated all quotations used in this article to English. Participants were initially contacted through their connection to the field school and indiscriminately selected based on their involvement in both state-run and informal economies, resulting in both male and female participants, ranging in age from around 30 to 60 years old, and identifying with a diversity of ethnicities.

Participant observation was conducted with four participants involved in unique small-scale agricultural production, including beekeeping, fishing, cacao, and vegetable gardening, and lasted between one and two hours. Sessions holistically incorporated casual conversation, observation of the environment and participants' activities, and informal interviews. Participant observation took place on the property of each participant, and/or at their given production site. Interviews were recorded through a handheld audio-recording device. Additional instances of shorter observation, casual conversations, and general experiences were recorded through photo, video, and fieldnotes throughout the research period in both Santiago de Cuba and the participants' communities.

In addition, two semi-formal interviews were conducted with professionals connected to sustainable development projects with small-scale coffee farmers in the eastern provinces to contextualize the current situation. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended guiding questions adjusted according to the participants' expertise. Interviews were conducted in Santiago de Cuba, lasting between 30-45 minutes, and audio recorded using a handheld recording device. Participants were asked to share their perspectives on food sovereignty efforts in the communities they partner with and in Cuba more broadly. All names of individuals, identifying factors, and exact locations have been anonymized using fictional names to protect the participants' identities.

Multimodal research techniques—including photography, video, and audio—facilitated a deeper and embodied engagement with the field and contextualized fieldnotes and interviews for a more holistic analysis. Audiovisual methods enabled a more phenomenological understanding of the complexities of the participants' experiences within a limited period of time by undertaking what Pink (2007, 107) calls a "video tour" – a collaborative exploration in which the

participant can elect what to express, and how, to form a representation of more quotidian activity. As a white American female, for whom Spanish is not my first language, collaborative visual methodologies allowed me to more effectively bridge linguistic and cultural barriers and actively engage with participants in a limited period of time. The resulting multimedia has also facilitated dissemination of preliminary findings through screenings in Santiago de Cuba.

Throughout this paper the term *campesino* is used interchangeably with "small-scale farmer," as this is how the participants self-identify. Food sovereignty discourse frequently uses the term "peasant" to refer to rural agricultural workers, but I avoid this term in my own elaboration where possible. Regarding economics, "informal" is used to refer to anything unregulated or otherwise outside of Cuban state control, encompassing but not necessarily restricted to illegal (black-market) activities. Meanwhile, "alternative economies" refers to production, trade, and acquisition that is marginal to practices recognized in the normative discourse.

Results: Strategies for Resolving Food Inadequacy

Cuba has long been recognized for maintaining low levels of malnutrition, despite decades of economic hardship and the enduring U.S. trade embargo. However, food scarcity has intensified in recent years, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the state food distribution systems are not as reliable as they once were (Garth 2021; Boudreault-Fournier and Gauthier 2024). Many of the individuals with whom I spoke emphasized how the monthly rations they receive do not come close to covering all their basic needs. In the city of Santiago de Cuba, there are some options for finding products through free and informal markets, though they are often expensive.

However, essential products are both far more scarce and far more expensive in the rural communities where I conducted my fieldwork. For instance, 1 liter of oil may be 700-800 pesos in the city (or around $2.50 USD), but a small informal vending stand in a village in the Sierra Maestra listed its price at 1150 pesos—equivalent to roughly four U.S. dollars at the going street exchange rate. Small differences in price such as this can make access to goods in rural areas far more prohibitive, especially when considering that the majority of Cubans, rural or urban, make a monthly income equivalent to less than $20 U.S. dollars (calculation of monthly salary my own, based on personal fieldnotes and figures reported by Boudreault-Fournier 2023).

Yet, even if one had access to the capital to purchase goods through these alternative sources, that doesn't mean that they will always be available. That stand was the only one I observed in the village, and it had nothing more for sale than a few packs of cigarettes, some foreign candies, the aforementioned bottles of oil, and an advertisement for homemade pizza. As Miguel, a small-scale farmer and fisherman whom I interviewed put it, "sometimes you have the money and go to town, but there isn't anything. Even with money, there's nothing to eat."[1] Despite his ability to grow *viandas* (fruits and root vegetables), such as *plátano* (banana) and *malanga* (a starchy tuber), and other produce on his family-farm to supplement the gaps in his rations, he explained that this still isn't always enough to feed his family. However, he recounted how individuals in the community who don't have the means to grow their own food may be far worse off:

> "It's difficult because there are people who have become accustomed to the bread from the bodega… there are those who didn't eat one day. There are those who didn't eat another day… This zone is predominantly *campesino*. It's always been

[1] *A veces tú tienes el dinero y te vas al pueblo, pero no hay. Ni con dinero hay nada qué comer.*

> the case that he who doesn't plant, doesn't grow. They always have something to eat, but there are some people who don't have anything."[2]

Finding sufficient food is a daily struggle for Miguel, and for many others in his community. While Miguel does grow some of his own food, he, like most, must routinely find ways to resolve food inadequacy through alternative economies and methods of production.

The strategies employed by the small-scale farmers with whom I spoke can be divided into three: Unsanctioned production, engagement with the black market, and grassroots mutual aid networks. While these modes of resolution do not encompass all the strategies employed by small-scale farming communities to improve their access to food, all the participants in this study utilized one or more of these strategies to make up a large proportion of their daily food intake and/or monetary income. While these strategies encompass varying levels of legality, they are all forms of informal economies that occur outside state control. Thus, an exploration of these strategies can highlight the agency employed by small-scale farmers to reclaim methods of food production and distribution in a crisis of food scarcity.

Unsanctioned Production

When certain foods are scarce, some Cubans turn to alternative and often unsanctioned forms of food production and acquisition to not only meet their basic nutritional needs, but their culturally grounded expectations of what constitutes a "decent meal" (Garth 2020, 37). For farmers like Miguel, the products he receives in his rations and the *viandas* he grows on his farm are not sufficient to meet what he considers to be an adequate—or decent—daily meal, and he

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[2] *Está difícil porque hay personas que se han acostado con el pan que le llevan a la bodega. Hay quien no comió ese día, hay quien no comió otro día…. Esta zona es de mucho campesino. Esto es así siempre, el que no siembra no cría. Siempre tienen algo que comer, pero hay algunos que no tienen nada.*

emphasized that, “I cannot eat rice every day.”[3] While rice and vegetables may meet basic needs for caloric intake, meat is a cultural staple food in Cuba and a key source of protein.

Miguel has taken this issue into his own hands and learned to spearfish by free diving in the nearby ocean. While this practice is illegal and highly dangerous, he considers fish as an essential part of his diet, especially as pork and chicken become less accessible through their scarcity and high price. He recounted, “I catch a fish, with my *malanga*, my *plátano*, my *viandas*—the things from the farm—and with that I survive a little bit more. Thanks to that… I have never stopped eating. We always eat, we always feed ourselves.”[4] By fishing illegally, Miguel exhibits an agency in finding a way to resolve the protein insufficiency in his diet, and thereby moves his family closer to a fully nourishing and satisfying meal.

Miguel’s experience highlights how food adequacy can provide a more accurate framework than food security to assess food systems, as his concerns stretch beyond mere nutritional sufficiency. While his family’s rations certainly don’t cover all their needs, they wouldn’t go hungry for any extended period of time thanks to his vegetable farm. However, while rice and *viandas* may satisfy Miguel’s family’s fundamental needs, he is also concerned with variety and cultural appropriateness. Perceived food inadequacy is what pushes Miguel to fish, thereby taking one aspect of food production into his own hands through an unsanctioned mode of production.

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[3] *Yo no puedo comer arroz todos los días.*
[4] *Llevo un pescado, mi malanga, mi plátano, mis viandas—las cosas de la finca—y con eso sobrevivo un poquito más. Gracias a eso…nunca he dejado de comer. Siempre comemos, siempre nos alimentamos.*

The Black Market

Across Cuba, efforts to resolve food inadequacy often leads individuals to engage with the informal economy. The omnipresent black market encompasses anything sold outside of state-sanctioned markets and bodegas, and most Cubans engage with it daily. This is one way to resolve scarcity of products and low income, as it allows individuals to purchase products that are otherwise unavailable through the legal market, or to sell goods as a way to acquire additional income (Weinreb 2009, 67-68). The majority of Cubans—rural or urban—with whom I spoke engaged with the black market in one way or another, and small-scale farmers in specialized industries often took advantage of their situation by selling their goods on the black market.

Small-scale farmers in Cuba typically work within the state's quota system; they must sell a certain amount of their given product to the state, in exchange for a low salary, and are allowed to keep the excess for personal consumption. For example, Maria is a middle-aged woman who works in a cacao cooperative near Baracoa. The cooperative must sell 90% of the cacao they produce to the state, and the remaining 10% can be used for personal consumption. They can generally do what they please with this remainder, so long as they do not sell it for profit, which is considered illegal in Cuba. Maria explained that, while they do consume a lot of cacao, "we Cubans use it for much more."[5] She uses cacao in cosmetics and medicine, and the cooperative sells these chocolate and cacao products illegally to tourists and people in the community. By creatively using the excess product leftover from their quota, the cooperative can resolve scarcity of certain cosmetics as well as access additional income.

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[5] *Nosotros cubanos lo usamos por mucho más.*

Similar dynamics exist in other specialized sectors of production. For Alejandro, a beekeeper in the Sierra Maestra, selling small quantities of excess honey is far more profitable than his annual two-ton quota of honey sold to the Cuban state. Carefully measuring honey with an old Havana Club Rum bottle, he explained how his annual salary (about $200 U.S. dollars) is not nearly sufficient. By illegally selling a few bottles of excess honey to students of the fieldschool, he made well over a month's salary in one afternoon.

Miguel also illegally sells *viandas* or the fish he catches to gain some extra income on occasion: "I catch a fish, which I then sell to buy spaghetti, because we cannot always eat *viandas* with fish and nothing more."[6] For him, selling products on the black market allows him to gain extra income which he can then use to buy other black-market food products that he does not receive through his rations—such as spaghetti, which he explained is his son's favorite. However, this isn't an easy or reliable way to access food, and he continued to comment that "I sell a fish… or I sell 100 pounds of *malanga*, and I buy rice, I buy a chicken, and more or less we go on. But it is not a good thing."[7] While the black market may allow individuals to access additional income or products during a time of scarcity, this isn't something that individuals like Miguel consider to be a reliable—or honorable—way of getting by.

Cuba's black market is unique in many ways, and the manners by which Cubans engage with it are complex and culturally contextual. While local perspectives on the black market vary from perceiving it as immoral to socially acceptable, engaging with the informal economy is a daily part of the Cuban experience and one way of resolving ongoing scarcity. For small-scale farmers,

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[6] *Yo cojo un pescado, que luego lo vendo para comprar espagueti, porque todo el tiempo no podemos comernos la viandita con el pescado y nada más.*
[7] *Yo vendo un pescado… o vendo 100 libras de malanga y compro arroz, compro un pollo y más o menos así nos andamos. Pero no es algo que está bueno*.

selling their products illegally is a form of agency that allows them to access additional income and comestibles that would otherwise be inaccessible, thereby mitigating the effects of systemic food inadequacy.

Mutual Aid Networks

While cultivating one's own food in personal gardens is not considered an unsanctioned activity in Cuba, it remains tangential to the state structure, which prioritizes formal (state) employment and food production within the larger revolutionary structure. Haddad (2003) comments how s*ociolismo,* or the redistribution of resources through community networks outside the state system, has historically been condemned by the government. Instead, most Cubans have become accustomed to receiving food through their state rations or, more recently, through the open and/or black markets. However, individuals living in rural areas can no longer rely upon their rations to fulfill their needs, and geographic isolation makes the availability of supplementary goods unreliable. In this context, the re-emergence of grassroots food networks based on mutual aid is one way small-scale farmers navigate the fine line between food sovereignty efforts "within the revolution" and frowned-upon *sociolismo* while attempting to resolve food inadequacy.

In the Ramon de las Yaguas mountains in rural Eastern Cuba, the organization *Los Caminos del Café* (Coffee Trails) has undertaken a project to rehabilitate ruined colonial-era coffee plantations (*Haciendas*) and turn them into living museums to revitalize tourism and shade-grown coffee production at the sites, simultaneously encouraging sustainable development in the surrounding communities. Carlos is a worker at one such site in a remote community. When the COVID-19 pandemic isolated their community from the outside world, Carlos had the idea to start a vegetable garden in his front yard to help feed the workers at the *hacienda*.

Starting with just a few beds of lettuce, the workers agreed to a communal division of labor and "put their hands to work" (*pusimos las manos a la obra)*. Carlos explained that, once the garden began to yield produce, "we said that we could do more… we began to diversify [the crops]… and so we decided to expand further."[8] The garden grew exponentially as more and more community members got involved, bringing new seeds back from trips to the city and donating their land to further the garden's expansion, and soon they were faced with an excess of produce. While some suggested selling the excess on the black market, Carlos disagreed, and instead they made a list of all the pregnant women, people over the age of 60, and children with physical disabilities in the surrounding community, and began giving them an allotment of produce as well. Above all, Carlos emphasized that they didn't want to leave this project behind as the pandemic drew to a close and, as he stood before the flourishing garden years later, he confidently claimed that "I think we achieved it" *(creo que se logró).*

In his words, "here we have a certain type of cooperative... it functions like one, but it isn't official."[9] While this garden is a perfect example of grassroots food sovereignty, it is not so clear-cut as other forms of production that arise either within or outside of state-approved practices. The workers embody enduring Cuban values of self-sufficiency, hard work, and self-sacrifice (Frederik 2005)—yet, as Carlos emphasized, it is still an "unofficial" method of production running tangential to the dominant structure.

This project also marks a resurgence of agricultural knowledge that has been lost after communities became accustomed to being provided for by state rations, which contributed to a systemic pattern of knowledge loss regarding small-scale cultivation. Prior to the garden project,

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[8] *...dijimos que podríamos hacer más… empezábamos a diversificar…decidimos entonces a ampliarlo más.*

[9] *...aquí tenemos una especie de cooperativa… funciona como eso, pero no es oficial*.

personal cultivation was nearly non-existent in the community, which focused on state-employed agriculture. “Now people buy garlic in the city, and they don’t throw out the seed,” Carlos concluded, “every day we try to do something more, something new, something impactful,”[10] emphasizing how the garden project has had a rippling impact in changing the community’s mentality towards mutual aid and encouraged the re-appropriation of small-scale cultivation as one way to address systemic food inadequacy.

Implications

The diverse strategies employed by the participants of this study (namely: unsanctioned production, black market activities, and mutual aid networks) highlight how small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba actively reshape their food systems in the face of widespread scarcity. These practices are more than just survival tactics but are acts of agency and adaptation as individuals negotiate between cultural values and practical necessity. By centering the lived experiences of small-scale famers, these findings complicate the dominant food sovereignty discourse as applied to Cuba. Thus, these findings call for a re-evaluation of how food sovereignty is conceptualized—one that recognizes the nuance and agency in the everyday practices of small-scale farmers as the actively seek to resolve food inadequacy. In the following section I therefore turn to a critical analysis of food sovereignty by highlighting how contradictory value and practice, alternative economies, and a framework of adequacy may complicate the dominant discourse.

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[10] *Ahora las personas compran un ají en la ciudad, y la semilla no la botan… cada día tratamos de hacer algo más, algo nuevo, algo que impacte*

Doble Moral: Critical Contradictions Between Value and Practice

The concept of *doble moral*—or dual morality—offers a critical lens for understanding the contradictions embedded in everyday food practices among small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba. *Doble Moral* is a commonly used term among Cubans and describes the contradiction in the way individuals may outwardly express loyalty to revolutionary ideals while simultaneously subverting those very values in their day-to-day life, often through participation in illegal economic spheres such as the black market (Wirtz 2004). *Doble Moral* has been well documented in urban contexts (Wirtz 2004; Garth 2019), but its presence in rural agricultural life remains underexplored. My findings suggest that *doble moral* is deeply woven into the lived realities of small-scale farmers, who must navigate between formal state-sanctioned economies and informal or illegal markets to meet their basic needs.

Small-scale farmers exemplify this tension as they simultaneously find pride and honor in hard agricultural work, and rely on the state for their land, wages, and rations, but most sell their products on the black market to supplement their low wages. Maria was vocally supportive of the government, repeatedly emphasizing how well she had been supported by the government during the pandemic and takes great pride in her work. "Every part of cacao is difficult, intense, but we do it with love and passion… we work to be happy," she told me, "we know that men are strong, but we women are very very strong."[11] Maria's rhetoric mirrors the idealized revolutionary image of the *campesino* as the embodiment of hard work, self-sacrifice, and pride in labor (Frederik 2005), yet also brings attention to the fact that many of her opportunities are a result of post-revolutionary efforts to diminish gendered labor differences.

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[11] *Todo del cacao es difícil, pesado, pero lo realizamos con amor y pasión… trabajamos para ganarnos contento… Se sabe que el hombre es "strong" pero nosotras las mujeres somos "very very strong".*

Yet, even while espousing this revolutionary morality, Maria simultaneously sells excess products on the black market to obtain additional income, directly contradicting those moral values. Miguel also reflected a moral dissonance when he said that selling on the black market "isn't a good thing" *(no es algo que está bueno).* This coexistence of revolutionary loyalty and illegal practice reflects what Haddad (2003) identifies as a form of "alienation"—a psychological and moral dissonance between one's socialized values and the actions required to survive within an economy of scarcity. Subverting the state system does not necessarily signify dissatisfaction in abstract revolutionary values but does contribute to feelings of alienation in small-scale farming communities, who feel that the system no longer supports them.

This negotiation between moral stance and lived practice also complicates dominant food sovereignty narratives, as it calls attention to how individuals' moral stances towards their food systems may not always align with the actions they must take to survive. The participants of this study expressed tension as they negotiate between a socialist morality and contradictory economic necessity that alienates them from their food systems. Some scholars have criticized food sovereignty discourse for portraying small-scale farmers as intentionally resisting dominant food structures to preserve culturally valued practices (Bernstein 2014); a short falling highlighted by the individuals in this study who must conversely sacrifice their cultural values to improve food adequacy. Thus, a consideration of *doble moral* in everyday choices of small-scale farmers as they negotiate between contrasting morality and necessary action can complicate the current food sovereignty discourse.

Accounting for Alternative Economies Within Food Sovereignty Strategy

In the case of Eastern Cuba, it becomes evident that steps towards food sovereignty are achieved not just through top-down policy, or even bottom-up grassroots movements like the

community garden project, but also through everyday engagement in unsanctioned production and the black market. Efforts towards food sovereignty in Cuba must therefore be seen as arising both within and outside of the state system—a holistic perspective that is missing in the current discourse, which addresses food sovereignty in Cuba either through top-down reforms or bottom-up grassroots efforts. In contrast, this study highlights how small-scale farmers find everyday ways to resolve food inadequacy through informal and alternative economies, a perspective that is all but nonexistent in current food sovereignty discourse.

These diverse ways of resolving food adequacy are all forms of agency, where small-scale farmers take processes of food production and distribution into their own hands. All the participants in this study engaged with informal food networks in one way or another daily, whether that be through unsanctioned production, buying and selling products on the black market, or mutual aid networks. Most of them relied on food products acquired through these informal means as part of their daily diet. This highlights that access, not just production, is the issue, and that engagement with informal economies in Cuba should be seen as a form of agency that allows individuals to acquire products that would otherwise be inaccessible. These individuals' efforts towards food adequacy complicate top-down food sovereignty policy and challenge the binary framing of food sovereignty arising as merely a resistance to industrial agriculture, as both narratives neglect small-scale farmers' agency in mitigating food inadequacy through creative and informal means.

Thus, Eastern Cuba's small-scale farmers can be seen as working towards certain aspects of food sovereignty by engaging with informal economies, but these strategies are not addressed in dominant food sovereignty discourse. Critiques of dominant food sovereignty discourse have pointed out that most small-scale farmers cannot support themselves exclusively through their

farms, and differing constraints may push individuals to take actions that run contrary to food sovereignty policy (Agarwal 2014; Bernstein 2014)—issues which are clearly illustrated through these individuals' experiences. In Cuba, unsanctioned production, participation in the black market, and mutual aid networks are all strategies towards achieving self-sufficiency on the household level, which is a key tenet of food sovereignty goals. I therefore argue that informal and alternative economies must be considered as legitimate approaches to food sovereignty, and discourse must holistically account for the complex intersection between formal and informal methods of production.

Adequacy: Bridging the Gap Between food Sovereignty Discourse and Practice

While malnutrition rates have historically been quite low in Cuba, Cubans are food vulnerable in other ways—through a lack of diversity, the exorbitant amount of time invested in procuring food, and in the fact that the majority of their income is invested in food purchase (Goeury 2024; Garth 2020). While the plan SAN does outline improved food security for the general population among its goals, it seeks to attain food sovereignty on the national rather than the individual level (MINAG 2020). This is a contemporary example of top-down food sovereignty programming that contributes to Cuba's reputation of success—a reputation that is not reflected in the lived realities of the nation's agricultural producers.

While the individuals I interviewed were not malnourished, the amount of time, effort, and money that goes into procuring food and the perceived adequacy of that food is an important factor in considering food security. The pressures induced on Cubans by the current all-encompassing economic and humanitarian crisis have pushed many to seek emigration options (see Boudreault-Fournier 2023), and small-scale farming communities are no exception. As Dr. Mariela Rodríguez, a scholar in Santiago de Cuba, commented. "if you are living in a place that

doesn't have many opportunities, you'd go to another. In the case of Cuba, there is a process of abandon… which brings as a consequence that rural zones have no population, and do not have agriculture."[12] Thus, the success of state-level programming cannot begin to be addressed without an in-depth understanding of the factors driving or inhibiting well-being in the small-scale agricultural communities that build the basis of food sovereignty efforts.

A framework of adequacy is therefore key to understanding the Cuban experience of food acquisition as it as it takes into consideration contextual issues such as ease of access, variety, and cultural value—as well as nutritional sufficiency. Regardless of nutritional metrics, the participants of this study were dissatisfied with their food system and issues such as difficulty of access, insufficient variety, and cost caused them to view their food as inadequate. This perceived inadequacy is what drove them to engage in alternative economies, taking methods of production and distribution into their own hands. Therefore, I propose that a framework of adequacy can effectively address the gap between top-down food sovereignty programming and lived experience, as well as highlight the short fallings of dominant food sovereignty discourse when applied to Eastern Cuba.

Limitations

This study was limited in terms of its timeframe and scope, which did not permit in-depth engagement with any one community. It therefore does not purport to indicate any general sentiment of the small-scale farming population in Cuba, but instead highlights the diverse experiences of the participants as exemplary of the complex strategies employed by the wider small-scale farming population in Eastern Cuba. Rather than attempting to represent a generalize

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[12] *Si estás viviendo en un lugar donde no tienes muchas posibilidades, te vas al otro. En el caso de Cuba, hay un proceso de abandono… que trae como consecuencia que las zonas rurales no tienen población, no tienen agricultura*

experience, this study aims to highlight diversity and nuance in the lived experiences of small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba to complicate current food sovereignty discourse and point to its limitations when applied to this context.

Conclusion

This study critically engages with food sovereignty discourse through an examination of food inadequacy in Eastern Cuba's small-scale farming communities, drawing attention to the diverse ways participants strive to reclaim their food systems amidst an economy of scarcity. Their experiences illuminate a critical gap in the discourse, which often portrays Cuba as a success story in state-level food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture programming. However, these narratives neglect the agency of individuals as they seek to improve their access to food both within and outside of state control.

An examination of the strategies employed by small-scale farmers in Eastern Cuba to mitigate food inadequacy highlights that efforts towards food sovereignty take place largely through informal strategies enacted by everyday people. These include unsanctioned production, informal and illegal markets, and mutual aid networks—all of which are efforts to reclaim control over food access. Such actions embody *La Via Campesina's* vision of food sovereignty as "the right of peoples to… define their own food and agriculture systems… putting the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems" (La Vía Campesina, n.d.). I therefore propose that food sovereignty discourse must account for informal economies and methods of production and argue that the current capitalist-centric discourse falls short by failing to address the agency of small-scale farmers working to improve food adequacy independent of the state in Cuba.

Furthermore, while all the participants in this study practiced 100% organic, sustainable agriculture, this is similarly misrepresented. Sustainable agriculture in Cuba can be seen not as a case of a state-enforced ideological shift, as is often portrayed, but is instead a form of agro-resilience employed by the farmers in the face of scarcity. José, the president of a Cuban coffee company, explained that all of the coffee farmers he works with practice sustainable production—but only because the ongoing U.S. trade embargo block imports of pesticides, fertilizers, and other intensive inputs. To mitigate scarcity, the small-scale farmers I interviewed also employ agroecological strategies; Alejandro uses embodied knowledge to tend his bees without protective equipment, geographically orienting his hives to produce the optimal yield of wildflower honey, while Maria practices intercropping and creates her own fertilizer with recycled cacao byproducts. Food sovereignty and agroecology are often linked in theory, and Cuba is upheld as a success in both (Menser 2014, 64-68). However, sustainable agriculture in Cuba can in reality be seen as a byproduct of scarcity—a form of agro-resilience which is driven through adaptation by small-scale farmers rather than a state-level ideological shift.

Thus, we must reassess narratives that portray Cuba as a success story in top-down food sovereignty policy. The worsening economic conditions driven by the ongoing U.S. trade embargo and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have created widespread food scarcity, and many Cubans view their food systems as inadequate. While state programs such as the plan SAN aim to strengthen food sovereignty on a national level, they fail to address the day-to-day struggles of rural agricultural communities. Portraying small-scale agriculture as working "within the Revolution" diminishes the agency of farmers striving to improve food security independently of the state, and *doble moral* highlights the often-blurry line between values and practice when it comes to food acquisition.

As socio-economic pressures in Cuba continue to rise, state-employed agriculture is not a viable livelihood—but this further compounds national issues of food scarcity. As Dr. Mariela Rodríguez commented, "because agriculture relates people, if the rural zones are depopulated, there cannot be agriculture."[13] Thus, food sovereignty as a theoretical framework cannot begin to be addressed in Cuba without an in-depth understanding of food access, adequacy, and acquisition in the small-scale farming communities that make up the backbone of the nations food system. In the words of Miguel, "as we Cubans say, for good or bad we will always eat." [14] Thus, as Cubans continue to find diverse and creative ways to resolve food inadequacy, their experiences provide a critical lens through which current food sovereignty discourse can be reassessed

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[13] *Porque la agricultura relaciona personas, si las zonas rurales quedan despobladas, no puede haber agricultura*
[14] *Como dicen los cubanos, bueno o malo, pero siempre nos alimentamos*

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