

Reframing Food Sovereignty in Eastern Cuba: Resilience and Agency Among Small-Scale Farming Communities

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Luis Orlando and Serafin started a community garden to feed the workers of UNESCO site La Fraternidad who were laid off during the pandemic. The garden took off and they now direct excess produce to individuals in the community with mobility issues

"It is very important to give value to *campesino* production" - Dr. Yaumara López Segre

2. Methodology

This study employed a **qualitative ethnographic approach** and **emergent design** to explore the nuances of participants' perspectives.

- Participant Observation
- Informal Interviews
- Semi-formal Interviews

Participants were small-scale farmers involved in fishing, honey, coffee, cacao, and vegetable production in Eastern Cuba. Fieldwork was conducted over 3 weeks in May-June 2024. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and thematically coded.

3. Results

Agency & Alternative Economies:

- Sourcing food illegally and/or selling their products on the black market allows participants to acquire goods that may otherwise be inaccessible.

Doble Moral (Dual Morality):

- Participants rely on the government for the land they live and work on, as well as their income, and maintain the Revolution's structure by adhering to their required production quotas.
- However, participants exhibit a dual morality[9] by participating in the black market, which may undermine state-led efforts to mitigate national food scarcity.

Sustainability & Agro-resilience:

- Participants resolve the scarcity of inputs like pesticides, fertilizers, and machinery by employing agroecological strategies.
- Sustainable production is not a personal choice, but a side-effect of resilience and adaptation by the farmers.



"Even with money, there is nothing to eat" - Orlenis

"After the pandemic, life became a bit more difficult" - Orlenis

"I can't eat rice every day. I catch a fish.. and with that I survive a little bit more." - Orlenis

1. Background

- After the 1959 socialist revolution, Cuba established a **rationing system** that **guarantees food as a human right**[1] and **agricultural reforms distributed land to small-scale farmers** in exchange for production quotas sold to the state[2]. Thus, Cuba is often portrayed as a success story in food sovereignty (FS) discourse [3], which often frames FS as a resistance against capitalist agricultural systems[4]
- An ongoing **economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic** and **trade embargoes** has created **nationwide scarcity**[5]. Today, Cubans experience **food shortages, blackouts, and extreme rates of inflation**, felt the strongest in the Eastern region of the island[6,7].
- With the worsening economic crisis, an ethnographic **understanding of current experiences of food access and adequacy in Eastern Cuba's small-scale farming communities** is necessary, and no such work has yet been done post-pandemic.



Alexis the Beekeeper makes more money selling a few bottles of leftover honey to friends and family on the black market than he does from his annual salary, based on a 2-ton quota sold to the Cuban government.

"Life in the fields is very hard, but very beautiful" - Daisy, the "Queen of Cacao"

4. Conclusions

- The economic crisis has greatly impacted the lived experience of food acquisition for many small-scale farmers, who exhibit agency and resilience in finding ways to resolve scarcity.
- This study reveals limitations in current food sovereignty (FS) and sustainable agriculture discourse that portrays Cuba as a success story and does not include alternative economies as a FS strategy.
- Understanding the realities of food access in small-scale agricultural communities is **crucial for improving state FS policies**, such as the National Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Education Plan (SAN) proposed in 2020[10].

This was a limited study that does not claim to represent a generalized perspective of the small-scale farming population in eastern Cuba.

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 All photos are my own. I have translated all quotes from Spanish.

What is Food Sovereignty?

"The right of nations and peoples to control their own food systems, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures, and environments[8]"

Intertwined with issues of **food security and cultural adequacy**

Research Questions

What does food adequacy mean in the socio-political and economic context of Eastern Cuba?

How can the perspectives and experiences of small-scale agricultural producers in Cuba inform and challenge current discourse on food sovereignty?