

Respect is not an option.

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Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

Separating the farmer from the land is a monstrous offence...
Jose Marti, Cuban journalist, poet, revolutionary. 1853-1895

Before the Revolution, Cuban farmers were illiterate peasants working the land for foreign owners.

In 1959, in one of the first legislative acts of the new government, Cuba nationalized farmland, expropriating (with compensation) the holdings of foreign companies (such as United Fruit) and giving it back to an estimated 2 million Cuban farmers with one caveat: it was theirs to work, to pass on to their children, but not to sit idle. ANAP, Cuba's national farmers' organization, was born shortly thereafter.

Today, Cuban farmers are amongst the top paid members of Cuban society, earning more than doctors and lawyers. They are recognized world leaders in organic farming practices. When ANAP speaks, government listens. Farmers are organized in strong cooperatives with elected boards. And busily diversifying out of sugar to meet domestic and tourist demand.

During the 60's, 70's and 80's, Cuba was a classic example of the Green Revolution: widespread monoculture (sugar, citrus) heavy dependence on chemical inputs, and one of the highest tractor to land ratios in the world. Cuba's economy was strong; Cuba sold sugar, rum, cigars and tropical fruit to the Soviet Union in exchange for all the goods Cuba needed but did not produce. A government focus on science, literacy, education, health care and housing gave Cubans the highest standard of living in Latin America (according to some indexes, higher than many regions of the US).

But then, in 1989-90, the collapse of the former Soviet Union threw Cuba's economy into a tailspin. In one year, Cuba lost over 60% of its food, most of its foreign exchange and all the inputs – pesticides, fertilizers, petroleum, machinery – needed to produce food in a conventional manner. Cuba was struggling to feed her people. New answers were needed.

Fortunately, Cuba had five things going for her:

1. good soils, climate and water;
2. strong scientific capacity and infrastructure within government;
3. strong cooperatives and literate farmers;
4. commitment by government to strong agricultural extension; and
5. one farm organization – ANAP - that advocated for farmers and greased the wheels for change.

In 1993, Cuba's Third Agricultural Reform Act converted many state farms to cooperatives, legalized farmers markets and created incentives to produce. In less than a decade, Cuba went from industrial, high-input farming to recognized world leadership in organic farming methods. In 1999, Cuba was awarded the prestigious Right Livelihood Award by the Swedish Parliament (considered the "alternate Nobel Prize") for recognized world leadership in organic production.

I began the Canada-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project in 1998. My instinct, as an Agrologist, was that Cuba's farmers had some interesting things to teach us (large scale use of bio-pesticides and bio-fertilizers, urban agriculture), and likewise Canadian farmers had expertise that was of interest to Cuba (livestock systems).

The first phase of the Project, the Farmer Tours, is about relationship building. Standing our farmers on the edge of beautiful Cuban fields of organic potatoes or beans or cabbages and pushing the paradigm that organic is only possible on small holdings by old hippies. Engaging in conversations with the Cuban farmers and recognizing - reflected back in their twinkley eyes - that same humble pride in healthy soils and a good crop that drives us. Building bridges of solidarity and respect built on sustainability, not politics.

In the six years since the Project's inception, 300 Canadian farmers have traveled to Cuba in fifteen delegations (see inset). These farmer delegations continue.

This year, we are hoping to also launch the Project's second phase – cooperative capacity building. With the Vancouver-based International Centre for Sustainable Cities (www.icsc.ca) we have a project – Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba – before the Canadian International Development Agency to take Canadian skills in animal husbandry and apply them to Cuba's intensive, grass/legume pasture management model to enhance pasture-based milk production capacity in Cuba.

Reciprocally, a south-to-north project will give Canadian farmers the benefit of Cuban expertise in large field use of biological controls and urban agriculture.

Down the road? A cooperative trade model. Cuba has 12 million people and a burgeoning tourism sector. Cuba needs beef and chicken and fine cheeses and apples and apricots and wines and berries and all the other specialty products Canada produces for its tourists and its population. But competition for foreign dollars is fierce; Cuba needs to import many things, and there are only so many dollars to go around.

The US farm sector is knocking itself out to sell to Cuba. Last September, from the floor of a Havana agricultural trade show attended by 285 companies from 33 U.S. states (including Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, ConAgra Foods, Hormel Foods, Perdue Farms and Tyson Foods; Florida sent 31 companies, more than any other state), Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura pleaded for an end to the embargo. Yet Washington's wacky politics towards this tiny island nation escalate.

Why shouldn't these goods come from Canada? What if, through co-op black box that shares profits with farmers, we could sell Cuba the specialty agricultural products it needs for tourism and the Cuban population, paid with fresh tropical mangoes and papayas and bananas and organic juice concentrates and honey and other products of commercial interest to Canada? Makes sense for both of us... Next steps? A three-month trial.

Farmers in Cuba have the respect of their communities because Cubans understand it is farmers who grow the food for the population. Respect is not an option. Canadian communities could learn from this.

For more details, call or email me (604-947-2893, holm@farmertofarmer.ca) or visit our websites www.farmertofarmer.ca, or www.theholmteam.ca,