

## THE CUBAN MODEL

EVEN DIEHARD OPTIMISTS thought Cuban economy otherwise so dependent on Soviet Russia would fall apart after the demise of Soviet Union. No doubt following the collapse of the Soviet Union Cuba came to a halt. But Cubans faced the challenge and showed the world that they could develop their own model to sustain the economy in a hostile atmosphere.

During the Cold War, the Cuban economy relied heavily on support from the Soviet Union and the other members of the Socialist Bloc. The Cubans sent sugar to the USSR, and in return received, most importantly, oil, but also a range of industrial products, including farm inputs such as chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, and tractors. The Soviets also sold cattle to the Cubans, and provided animal feed and antibiotics. Approximately 50 percent of Cuba's food came from abroad.

From 1989 to 1993, the Cuban economy contracted by 15 percent; foreign trade dropped a precipitous 75 percent. Without Soviet oil, city streets were emptied of cars and, more ominously, tractors were idled in the fields; domestic agriculture production fell by half. Millions of hogs, cattle, and goats died as the processed forage and antibiotics they had come to depend on evaporated. Imported essentials such as vegetable oil and wheat flour were difficult to come by.

Then the Cubans went to work, proving that necessity is, in fact, the mother of invention. Without government direction or urging, people began to spontaneously grow their own food. In the cities, residents took over garbage dumps, parking lots, and abandoned corners, and started to plant gardens and build chicken coops. In the countryside, the old-timers went back to the fields and showed people how they could make do with oxen and using their own hands to do the labour.

Today, Cuban agriculture is on the mend. Vegetable production doubled from 1994 to 1998, and then doubled again in 1999. Harvest totals for key crops such as potatoes and plantains have tripled. Cereal and bean yields are up, as are numbers for meat and egg production. Perhaps most significantly, daily caloric intake is back to its 1989 level and, in a sign of restored prosperity, some Cubans are beginning to worry about obesity.

And all of this has occurred using just a fraction of the chemicals that agriculture in the "developed" world depends on. Before the crisis hit, Cuba used more than 1 million tons of synthetic fertilisers a year, today it uses about 90,000 tons.

During the Soviet period, Cuba applied up to 35,000 tons of herbicides and pesticides a year; today the number is about 1,000 tons. The country is a living example of how to grow food on a large, national scale without being reliant on petroleum based inputs. □□□