

Deconstructing Dinner

Lessons from Cuba

How Cuba's agricultural revolution can help guide the rest of the world towards more responsible food production.

On August 19 2008, Member of Parliament for BC Southern Interior, Alex Atamanenko, launched a nation-wide tour to gather feedback from Canadians on what a national food policy in Canada should look like.

To date, Canada does not have any such policy.

Atamanenko's national tour suggests that with political will, Canadians can indeed encourage our political leaders to remove barriers to more localized and responsible food systems. A food policy could instead help encourage and support such systems through economic and political means.

Cuba is a prime example of the impact that political will can have on a nation's food supply.

In just over 15 years, Cuba's food system has shifted from a conventional North American-style model, to a more responsible, diversified and efficient system based on ecological principles

One person deeply familiar with Cuba's transition is Fernando Funes Monzoté who will soon be completing his PhD on mixed farming systems at the University of Matanzas. Funes Monzoté is the son of one of the key figures in Cuba's organic revolution, Dr. Fernando Funes Sr.

Similar to the Canada of today, Cuban agriculture was once built upon an export-driven model of conventional and resource-intensive agriculture. Over the course of many decades, this model encouraged the steady migration of rural Canadians into cities. Cuba, on the other hand, experienced this trend in less than 10 years.

“At the beginning of the revolution in 1959, about 75% of the population lived in the countryside,” says Funes Monzoté. “In about 10 years, this changed rapidly; about 75% of the population became concentrated in the cities and agriculture became very centralized and controlled.” This ‘control’, as Funes Monzoté suggests, restricted the capacity of farmers to develop their own agriculture.

Canada is in quite a similar position today. Our farmers have become increasingly reliant upon export-oriented systems controlled by multinational corporate interests. Through developments such as genetic engineering (or modification) as an example, farmers are prohibited from saving seed as has been done for millennia.

For Cuba, the 30 years following the revolution was only a small blip in a long history of domination by foreign interests. “For about 400 years, Cuba was an export-oriented culture based on the exploitation of our resources,” describes Funes Monzoté. “Cuba produced all of the raw materials for Europe, and Europe exported all of the technologies necessary to produce those materials.”

In 1989, this 400-year history ended within four years.

The Soviet Union collapsed, and imports shrank by 70%. Included in those imports were the chemicals, fossil fuels, and technologies required to run Cuba’s agricultural systems. By 1993, Cuba was plunged into a crisis; their food system very quickly became dysfunctional. “The change was not a choice, it was a necessity for the country,” says Funes Monzoté.

Canada is not immune to the dependencies that Cuba had fallen into and is too approaching this ‘necessity’ that Funes Monzoté speaks of.

Our agricultural systems are just as export-oriented as Cuba’s were and our natural resources are extracted daily, en masse, and sent abroad; petroleum, natural gas, coal, forestry products and the virtual water embedded in our agricultural commodities.

While Canada continues to support policies that undermine the ability for us to produce food for local consumption, Cuba’s government instead made some radical shifts and began aggressively supporting new food production models. Without fossil-fuel dependent technologies, more ecological systems were adopted. “All of the farms, from the small farm to the big co-operatives, became based on diversification to overcome the lack of inputs from abroad,” describes Funes Monzoté.

Urban agriculture was also heavily supported. According to Funes Monzoté, 70% of the perishable foods consumed in the city of Havana are grown in Havana. The rapid shift to more urban forms of agriculture also employed a whopping half a million people! “In 2006, there were four million tonnes being produced in and around cities,” says Funes Monzoté.

There is today, however, concern that these ecological models may not remain. As Cuba becomes more tied in to the global economy, it is feared that the inroads made over the past 15 years may begin to fall apart in exchange for the conventional systems dominating global agriculture. Funes Monzoté believes that education is the key to preventing this from happening.

He provides one suggestion. “In Cuba we still don’t have a certification system for organic products and I would recommend to not have one. I would instead recommend certifying the production of conventional systems with chemical inputs.”

In other words, Funes Monzoté suggests that organic methods once again become the ‘conventional’ norm, just as they were only a few short decades ago.

If Cuba is indeed a model for the world to follow, perhaps Canada's new and upcoming national organic certification system and logo is heading in a rather shortsighted and dangerous direction.

Deconstructing Dinner is heard on radio stations across Canada and is available as a Podcast. More information on today's topic can be found at (www.cjly.net/deconstructingdinner/082108.htm).

Crosshead Option

“All of the farms, from the small farm to the big co-operatives, became based on diversification to overcome the lack of inputs from abroad.” – *Fernando Funes Monzoté on Cuba's organic revolution.*