

Dos Papas, pero sin papas...

A long-time observer of Cuban agriculture and culture braces for the U.S. invasion

THE MORNING DAWNS BRIGHT with promise. In the Havana neighbourhood of Vedado, the shiny green leaves of the tall palms lining its streets move gently against a backdrop of fluffy white clouds. It is Valentine's Day, and all of Cuba is mad with love. People on the street greet each other with "Felicidades del dia de amor!!!" and I receive at least 10 texts from Cuban friends sharing the same message.

Facing unprecedented change that will impact every aspect of their lives, the Cubans I know are bravely optimistic. Although the punishing economic blockade imposed by the US in 1961 remains firmly in place, Washington is moving towards "normalization" – in 2015 the United States re-opened its embassy in Havana, and Cuba re-opened its embassy Washington. The very private meetings between Cuba and the U.S. that facilitated this easing were hosted by Canada and the Vatican.

Pope Francis visited Havana for the second time February 12th to meet with Su Santidad Kirill, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was the first time in almost ten centuries that leaders of these two branches of the Catholic Church – which split from one another in 1054 – met. The two "Papas" – as they are referred to affectionately by the Cuban people –

signed a 30-point declaration of cooperation, following which Pope Francis announced to the world that Cuba is emerging as the global leader in unification.

It is said that Obama will visit Cuba in March – the first sitting American President to do so. Direct flights from the U.S. are scheduled to resume in 2016; American Airlines is rumoured to have promised more than 20 flights a day to Cuban cities. Foreign cruise ships will soon be weighing anchor in Havana Bay. Already, the streets of Cuba are awash with tourists, many making early morning rounds of hotels and casas particulares (bed and breakfasts) hoping to find a room. While none have (yet) been offered a manger, there have been incidences of tourists sleeping in parks, under the protective eye of police and ambulance workers. Meanwhile, foreign business delegations sniff eagerly at the socialist carpet, hoping to find a spot to mark.

The Cuban government, under the leadership of Raul Castro, opened the door to change with sweeping policy guidelines (Los Lineamientos) released in March 2011. Intended to modernize Cuba's socialist model to function more effectively in a changing global economy, the guidelines commit the Cuban government to strengthening agricultural cooperatives, encouraging

the creation of worker cooperatives in the non-farm sector, and opening the door to over 200 types of small private enterprise (cuenta propistas), principally in the areas of construction materials, carpentry, housing renovation, auto repair, food and hospitality services, hotels, transportation, recycling and furniture-making.

Cubans – 90 percent of whom own their homes outright with no mortgage – are now able to buy and sell houses in hard currency. This has resulted in dramatic inflation in house prices as foreigner investors, under the cloak of "shadow ownership", invest in the hope that prohibitions on foreign ownership will ease. This is, of course, changing neighbourhoods.

My once-quiet Vedado street is now filled with the sounds of drilling, grinding, polishing and hammering as foreign money restores gracious old homes for their new occupants. The tranquility of this Valentine's Day Sunday morning is a welcome relief...

Government plans for unification of Cuba's two currencies (Moneda Nacional, the national currency of Cuba and the Convertible Peso, the currency used by foreigners, introduced following the collapse of the former Soviet Union) are well underway. This will inevitably result in further inflation.

As an agrologist, my greatest concern

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is how all this will impact Cuba's farmers. Land reform was central to the Cuban Revolution, and farmer cooperatives have been the backbone of Cuban agriculture since the 1960s. Today, 80 percent of food produced in Cuba comes from its 5,474 worker and producer cooperatives, which together represent over 518,007 farmers working close to 3 million hectares of land.

In the past, the Cuban government contracted food production from the farmers and distributed it to the population. In the 1990s, to stimulate production, crops surplus to contracted amounts could be sold in farmers markets for higher prices.

Several years ago, to rationalize the food distribution system and stimulate import replacement, products bought by the state were reduced in number to those considered essential to the Cuban diet, and payments to farmers were increased. Products not on the contracted list are now sold on an "oferta y demand" (supply and

demand) basis in farmers markets and directly to hotels and restaurants.

The big problem now facing farmers – and the Cubans who rely on their production – is infrastructure. While urban "organoponicos" (cooperatives that produce organic vegetables on small plots in cities) sell direct to consumers, food produced in the countryside faces serious distribution challenges. Not all cooperatives have the resources to deliver food daily to the cities. Intermediaries are scarce and opportunistic, attracted by higher prices offered by those selling food to tourists.

Several weeks ago, most farmers' markets in Havana – which supply the mainstay of the Cuban diet and are normally well stocked – offered only a meagre selection. Street vendors pushing carts along the tree-lined streets of Vedado singing "ajo, ceboya, guyaba, yucca, malanga, lechuga, boniato" all but disappeared.

Meanwhile, Agromercado 19 y B, the favourite food market of "paladares"

(private restaurants), foreign embassies and foreign staff living in Cuba, was bursting with produce at prices which – to my eye – had increased some 20-30 percent in the past six months.

Lingering outside Agromercado 19 y B, in voices so subtle you might think it was the rustling of leaves, men in gold chains and Nikes whisper "papas", opening sacs to reveal the beautiful potatoes sought by the local paladares. Priced in hard currency, these papas are absolutely beyond the reach of the average Cuban.

The Ministry of Agriculture is attempting to address the problem, and supply problems have eased somewhat in recent weeks. But complexities remain.

The tsunami of foreigners arriving on Cuba's shores will undoubtedly pump money into the Cuban economy. The question is, what impact will this have on the Cuban people and their communities? **D**

