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ACADEMIC ARTICLES

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF UNDERTAKING DOCTORAL RESEARCH IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN CUBA DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD (1998–2000)

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Abstract

This article describes the methodological challenges encountered in attempting to undertake research into the agricultural sector in Cuba, and the often serendipitous ways in which these challenges may be overcome. The struggles of numerous Cuban researchers who were attempting to continue their work during the resource-poor Special Period are also described. The article examines the views of Cuban colleagues who have informally, and politely, contested interpretations of the ‘snapshot’ of the farming and food systems that the author documented, and discusses their differing perspectives of ‘the real situation’. The author ends with observations about the book that emerged as an adaptation of the doctoral thesis¹ and how it has become a seminal text not only for students but also for civil society groups working for change toward more sustainable systems that are less dependent on fossil fuels.

Keywords: research, agriculture, sustainability, Special Period

Introduction

It was in about 1992 that I first became interested in Cuba from a professional perspective; rumour had it that Cuba was ‘going organic’ owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was working in international agricultural development and

had from the outset aligned with organic farming approaches. If a whole nation were practising organic farming, this would clearly have major implications for the rest of the world's farming and food systems and especially in terms of food security, sustainable agriculture and human health. If this was not happening in Cuba, then begged the question 'Why not?' From that point of first interest, and notwithstanding the supposed interest of the global agricultural sector in sustainability, it took 6 years to secure the funding to undertake doctoral research in Cuba, finally receiving support through the EU Marie Curie Training and Mobility of Researchers Awards.² My overall research objective was to evaluate the implications for both the agricultural sector and the food system, of the impact of a widespread reduction in the petroleum-based inputs that Cuban agriculture was dependent on, drawing from the Cuban experience.³

This article aims to describe the methodological challenges encountered in attempting to undertake research in Cuba, and the often serendipitous ways in which these challenges were overcome. Along the way, I encountered the struggles of numerous Cuban researchers who were attempting to continue their work during the resource-poor Special Period. Some Cuban colleagues have informally, and politely, contested my interpretation of the 'snapshot' of the farming and food systems that I documented, and each of them has a different perspective of 'the real situation'. Nevertheless, the book that emerged as an adaptation of my doctoral thesis⁴ has become a seminal text not only for students but also for civil society groups working for change toward more sustainable systems that are less dependent on fossil fuels.

Methodological Considerations of a Cautious Doctoral Student

Any attempt to evaluate the farming and food system over a whole country is ambitious, especially when the country is relatively secluded and reticent, as was the case for this research. Notwithstanding the extensive research planning that took place, the final research design developed as an emergent product of the research process, rather than through rigid adherence to a fixed framework. In particular, it was governed in practice by the opportunities encountered in the field, which in turn affected not only the methodology but also the development of the analytical framework, which in turn was influenced by the author's background in applied development research and her university research department's focus on Innovation, Communication and Knowledge Systems (at Wageningen University).

Much secondary information was unavailable to the author pre-field, given the 2 to 5 year time lag of publications coming out of Cuba, and the unavailability of data. Rosset comments in relation to data access: 'Obtaining any figures at

all is very difficult, owing to the longstanding reluctance of the Cuban government to release them and to post-crisis cutbacks in data compilation and publishing' (1996: 67). Mesa-Lago (1998), in an attempt to assess the economic and social performance of the Cuban transition in the 1990s, notes in relation to Cuban data that 'Statistical series vanished at the beginning of the transition, making a serious evaluation virtually impossible. In 1995–97, important data were released but their reliability is questionable' (857).

Both the shortage of available data and uncertain research circumstances within Cuba meant that a reference framework was developed rather than an a priori hypothesis. In this case, grounded theory was considered the most appropriate theoretical approach for dealing with such empirical uncertainties (Strauss and Corbin 1990). For this study, grounded theory (the generation of theory from research) could be used to evaluate the validity of secondary information on the state-of-the-art of agriculture in Cuba, to draw in empirical evidence on coping strategies employed by both people and institutions, and to elaborate and modify existing theory on ecological agriculture and food security.

The research circumstances strongly influenced the fieldwork approach. Given that the research topic had been chosen by the author, and thus the lack of local (Cuban) impetus for this research, exploratory, opportunistic and documentary approaches were selected over more interactive options. A further parameter to the scope of fieldwork was of a practical nature; the modest financial resources of the project, which would affect transport, fees of counterparts and assistants, execution of large-scale surveys, and so on. Exploratory research, meanwhile, would be appropriate in that it was flexible enough to cover most eventualities.

Because it was not evident whether quantitative data could be collected in the field, options for the fieldwork investigation were left open, and methodological tools were prepared which could be adapted to both quantitative and qualitative approaches. These included the design of both questionnaires and semi-structured surveys, and the development of a selection of data collection tools from the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Rural Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS) toolboxes. In view of these uncertainties, a re-evaluation of the appropriateness of methodologies and data collection was planned after the initial fieldwork period.

During the early stages of the project, efforts were focused on developing links within Cuban institutes and identifying potential collaborators. Yet despite meticulous prior planning, it was only once in Cuba, and after several months of visiting different research institutes, reframing the research project, and negotiating with different Ministries, that a host institute could be officially confirmed and a project agreement signed. This enabled official permission for the author

to go ahead with the research. Without this authorisation, and notwithstanding the unofficial friendships and supportive contacts that had been made, no research could be undertaken, and any unofficial research could jeopardise the careers of those contacts. Major contributory factors to this delay in obtaining permission included sensitivities about foreigners undertaking particular kinds of research, and the research budget available which was considered way below that normally expected of foreigners.

An arrangement was finally made with the National Institute of Agricultural Sciences (INCA), to work under the umbrella of their new Participatory Plant Breeding Project. Although the initial research phase was therefore shorter than planned – just 8 weeks, a relationship of trust was built up with the project team and research institute, and on this basis a second period of fieldwork could be organised around a more ambitious and longer project.

Thus, the first fieldwork period resulted in a case study on three CPA⁵ farm cooperatives in Havana province. These cooperatives were partners in an existing project with INCA, and INCA had research authority to work there. The second period was undertaken over three subsequent trips to Cuba between 1999 and 2001, and looked at a wider range of CCS⁶ and UBPC⁷ farm cooperatives and their support systems in the provinces of Havana, Cienfuegos and Holguin.⁸

Developing a Relevant Theoretical Framework for the Cuban Context

Commonly used in the development sector internationally, the Rural Livelihoods Framework (RLF)⁹ had not been originally considered useful in the Cuban situation, largely because of the unique political context whereby the State was in control of specific forms of capital and where the farmers were not seen as decision-makers. Whereas the RLF had been developed and applied in other parts of the world with different, more capitalist, economic contexts. It was only taken up after an initial field visit confirmed its utility once some adaptations had been made.

The production system in Cuba was a factor of the external impacts resulting from the crisis, of individual and collective perceptions and coping strategies, and of the mechanisms of the institutional support system. Thus, it was a mixture of longstanding smallholder farms and large state farms, of plantation and mixed cropping systems, and farmers and land workers were adapting to the contemporary situation in terms of the lack of input and support. A framework was required that embraced this, which purposefully sought to capture the dynamics of rural agricultural production and to identify adaptive and coping

strategies in times of crisis. The RLF was concerned with linkages, interactions, influences and processes, yet it also embraced the wider external influences, the factors internal to the individual or group, and the possible entry points for reform through policy and institutional change (Kaag *et al.* 2004).

The rural livelihoods concept had originally taken as its point of departure that livelihoods involved more than the one- or two-way exchange and use of resources, including knowledge, but that other influential factors were involved. In doing so, it recognised the centrality of actors' cognitive factors such as interests, interpretations, experiences and knowledge (Arce and Hebinck 2002). This was described by Long (2001) as agency: 'The notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion' (Long 2001: 16). Long (2001: 6) also noted that it is not only single individuals who had agency but also groups of actors and organisations. Using this perspective, the extent to which change was brought about by external circumstances could be assessed, as well as the degree to which actors took a role in change.

Nevertheless, some modification of the standard RLF framework (Scoones 1998) was required for this study, in order to focus on the overall context and vulnerability of the rural agricultural sector in Cuba, on farmers' livelihood assets, agency and strategies, the institutional structures, processes and agency, and the outcomes in relation to production strategies. The concept of the agricultural knowledge system remained an inherent part of this framework. Figure 1 shows the modified Rural Livelihoods model as the main theoretical framework.

The first modification was that the core focus of the normative model the household – was replaced by individual actors or groups of actors. This was because the focus of this study was not on individual farming families but on farmers working as part of cooperatives within a type of 'collective household'. The second modification was that the notion of the individual applied not only to farmers but also to other actors in the framework, such as researchers, ministry representatives, and so on, with each actor or group having his, her or its own set of assets, structures, influencing contexts, and weaknesses. Cuba's centralised system meant that farmers in Cuba did not hold the same degree of individual decision-making power over their production strategies as did farmers in most other countries. Therefore, the study examined the emergent strategies and outcomes as a function of interactions between all actors, rather than just the farmers.

Third, whereas the normative RLF model placed market and other economic trends within a general context of vulnerability, an ecological agriculture – and the ideology that came with it in terms of developing a compatible food system

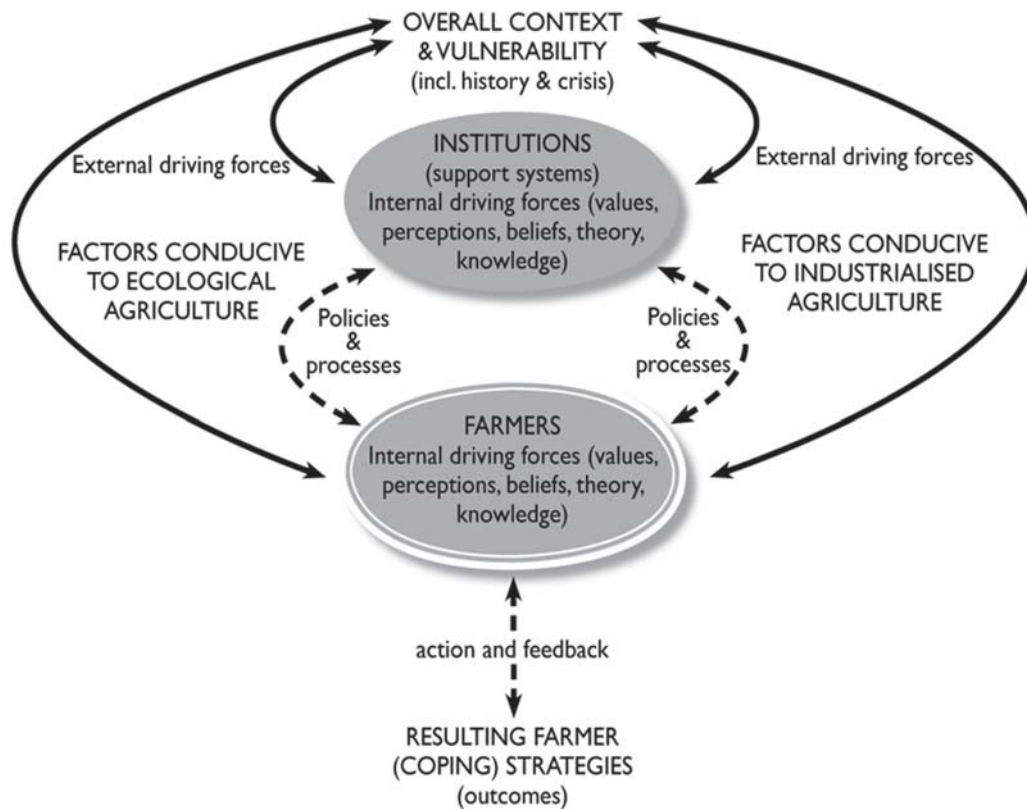


Figure 1 Modified Rural Livelihoods model: the dynamics of rural livelihood interactions and their driving forces

that supported such a production system – would not necessarily imply that coordination through markets was the main driving force, nor that agriculture could be properly represented as a simple exploitation of natural resources. (In fact, ecological agriculture attempts to work in harmony with, rather than exploit, the natural resource base, and conventional markets that are based on long food supply chains, on treating foods as commodities, and on high levels of processing, are inherently at odds with the quality and fair income priorities of ecological agriculture.) Such trends might instead be regarded as outcomes of organisational processes, differentiated from biophysical contexts. This adaptation emphasised that economic factors were man-made and could be more readily engineered for change. Finally, modifications were made in order to better account for the potential of farmers to influence their environment through feedback mechanisms with institutions and with the overall context (e.g., by reducing vulnerability through resilience building), such mechanisms not being well recognised in the original Framework model.

Experiences in the Application of Different Data Gathering Tools in the Farming and Food Sector

During the first fieldwork phase, two methods were used for data collection: secondary data reviews, and ethnographic institutional meetings and farm visits.

Secondary data reviews

Largely due to the conditions of the Special Period in Cuba from 1989 to the 2000s, there was a lack of up-to-date international literature coming into the country, very limited access to Internet sources, and lack of resources for institutes to continue publishing their scientific journals. As a result, much domestic research was not widely disseminated and remained in the hands of the researchers themselves, and some was not meant for publication or dissemination at all. Obtaining access to it required time to build up contacts and confidence. This, combined with the time constraints of the author, meant that some literature could not be accessed.

For example, one research centre's library contained 37 Cuban scientific journals, of which only 13 had volumes dated after 1992–93 and only four of these had almost continuous series. Socio-cultural literature was lacking from both post- and pre-1989. Under the library heading 'sociology' was a list of Marxist-Leninist tomes. According to one key informant, little attention had been paid to the social aspects of food production; this was not felt by the State to be necessary in such a socialist country. Rural social studies were in fact undertaken but within university faculties of geography and sociology rather than by agricultural research institutes. Foreign journals also petered out after 1990.

Institutional meetings

A similar circumstance was encountered when carrying out interviews, as time, and multiple visits, were required to build up trust and confidence (particularly with the non-Cuban author), and there was insufficient time for this by the author who had funding for only a year of fieldwork and needed to cover several provinces. As such, it became apparent that the diagnostic participatory tools were not appropriate, as even the simplest of them required a level of mutual confidence. Some respondents (researchers, administrators, managers) appeared nervous even if notes were taken during an interview, or if reference was made to a checklist of questions as it brought an element of officialdom. Others did not appear comfortable with using the visual tools, such as for making a schematic of institutional linkages and rankings. Some RAAKs tools were briefly tried out and met with the same response; one respondent refused to pick up the pencil that had been proffered. This response could be explained partly in that

some of these research tools were not appropriate to the culture, but also there was an element of reticence to share information with the author. To a great extent this was understandable, as various Cuban researchers explained that their country had experienced problems with specifically US visitors gathering information and then using it for negative purposes once out of the country.

Cooperative farm surveys

After some experimentation with its application, surveys were handed out to each farm worker with the help of key contacts. This method was most preferred by the farmers; although when initially distributing the surveys, some workers refused on the grounds that they could not write, and others that they lacked the confidence to undertake the task. Names were recorded and the survey forms collected back at a pre-arranged date. A total of 60 surveys were distributed amongst the three CPAs studied, of which 25 were completed, i.e. 42 per cent. This high return rate yielded more than the author would have been able to undertake on a face-to-face basis. The key contact at one CPA modified the method by arranging for 5 workers to answer one questionnaire between them.

Overall, just over 12 per cent of the total number of workers within the three focus CPAs responded. Respondents to the survey included co-operative presidents, heads of production, heads of farms, farm workers, agronomists, and mechanics.

Diagnostic tools

The same reactions to the diagnostic research tools were encountered in the production site visits as with the institutional meetings. Thus, most of the data was collected in the form of relaxed, semi-structured interviews which were not sound recorded but the author took notes. These interviews usually took place on a one-to-one basis either in an office or the field. A seasonal calendar was attempted in several cases, though the author was unable to pass control of drawing the diagram over to the respondent.

In the second fieldwork phase, semi-structured surveys and checklists of questions were used to assist dialogue with key actors, and basic diagnostic rapid rural appraisal (RRA) tools prepared. A questionnaire was used for farms, and this was tested with Cuban research colleagues and then fine tuned on an ongoing basis during the research period.

Cooperative farm questionnaire

For the UBPC farms, better results were obtained when two respondents were present, as their individual responsibilities were more limited and they did not

have a complete picture of the operations of the farm. It was notable that many UBPC workers had very low levels of knowledge both of the farming system and in terms of relative literacy; they were generally not educated to a high level and had come from State farms where they were used to following instructions rather than self managing. Some of the CCS farmers also lacked confidence in answering the questionnaire, and had difficulties in following its structured format. A widely encountered challenge was that respondents were more accustomed to promoting positive achievements than to analysing or evaluating their work performance, and especially from a social perspective. Furthermore, farmers were reluctant to provide accurate information on production quantities in case it led to their production plan being increased with Acopio.¹⁰

The questionnaire had been designed to gather quantitative data relating mainly to the current year. To ascertain longer-term trends, the author had prepared another quantitative form for completion by farm administrators. However, given the recent changes in land tenure and in institutional responsibilities (whereby state farms had been made to downsize and self-manage), it proved very difficult to ascertain whether such information existed, or to access it, at both farm and institutional levels. Because of this lack of long-term quantitative data, it was not possible to run statistical analyses.

RRA tools

The two RRA tools most effective for drawing out relevant information were found to be the seasonal calendar and the problem-causal tree. The first of these could also be used to incorporate a longitudinal dimension by comparing with previous cropping years. The success rate of the problem-causal tree varied however. Evidence from the field suggested that the main limitation to production might be a lack of petrol or of agrochemicals; however, some respondents did not agree with this causality, and the author felt this was at least partly because they were not wanting to expose the challenges they had faced or were facing.

The fieldwork team

During the first fieldwork phase, the author had undertaken all the work herself. For this second perspective, the author worked at various times with one to three Cuban researchers and field assistants, depending on their availability, but she had to be accompanied by at least one Cuban counterpart. One challenge encountered was the difference in backgrounds of the team members. In particular, the author was a generalist and trained in participatory approaches, whereas the other team members were more specialised and held their own specific perspectives about the issues under study which led to a different bias in their

questioning to that of the author. On the other hand, the team members made a considerable contribution to the project, contributing different knowledge and insights, and stimulating responses and interactions which the author, as a non-Cuban, would have been unable to achieve alone. One field assistant, for example, himself a longstanding ecological farmer and consultant, was able to establish rapid trust to the extent that the respondent would open up with some rich anecdotal story. Another team member, a sharp, high-level academic from Havana who held a close affinity with the Cuban smallholder farmers, had the curiosity and nerve to confront and question certain institutional responses that the author did not feel in a position to do.

Experiences with Attempting to Enquire into Potentially Sensitive Issues

Enquiry into food security: Issues surrounding food supply and security were understandably sensitive for the Cuban authorities. Sometimes it was not possible to gain access to specific documents or to arrange interviews with key official functionaries in the food system. This official sensitivity prompted a certain caution, perhaps over-caution, by the author in broaching the topic. Nevertheless, as fieldwork progressed and questions relating to food supply were included in discussions, little avoidance was encountered amongst grassroots respondents (farmers, householders) to answer these questions. In daily life, Cubans were very receptive to talking about their food supplies and difficulties in obtaining certain foodstuffs. In retrospect, more primary data could have been gathered on this issue.

Enquiry into organic agriculture: At the time of the author's arrival in Cuba, and during much of the fieldwork period, ecological and organic agriculture was a politically sensitive issue.¹¹ This may have contributed to the early delays in the researcher obtaining research permission.

Practical Challenges to Carrying Out Fieldwork

Throughout the periods of fieldwork, certain challenges were encountered by the author in accessing data. Some topics were too sensitive to allow a direct line of enquiry, and/or enquiry was met with a zero or avoidance response (this strongly related to the author being foreign and the need for trust to be better developed through, for example, more informal exchanges, while Cuban researchers may not have asked the same questions which were often driven by curiosity of an outsider to the system). On several occasions during interviews, stories would change, mainly as a result of discrete exchange between interviewees during the course of the interview. On one occasion, for example, the interviewee was explaining how

organic banana production was impossible for the moment, and then, after receiving a scribbled message from a colleague, made a U-turn to explain how Cuba was already almost organic. On another occasion, a senior interviewee stood behind the author and made hand signals to her team to change the conversation. Another challenge was that the field opportunities made available were not wholly appropriate for gathering the relevant data, and the author and her project did not have sufficient perceived status to access higher levels of information that were available to, for example, United Nations staff in Havana. Furthermore, the author was sometimes overly cautious in some lines of enquiry and did not dig as deeply as might have been possible, whilst her ambitions for data collection were sometimes rather highly set. At other times, the data were simply not available, such as economic analyses per farm, published research results, institutional annual reports, aerial photographs or land survey information.

Recommendations for Undertaking Research in Cuba

Given the sanctions and other actions of the United States against Cuba up until this time (see, for example, Baker 2004), and the strong relations between the US and the UK, and the poor political relations between Cuba and the EU and especially the UK, the country was understandably cautious about working with foreign researchers on issues of domestic importance. During the course of the research period, many other foreigners (mainly from Europe and the US) interested in undertaking their own research there came and left empty-handed. When attempting research in Cuba, the author encountered strict procedure and a lot of luck and chance. Parameters change radically according to the individual. Based on this, Box 1 identifies some recommendations for attempting to undertake research in Cuba, as

Box 1 Recommendations for success in organising research in Cuba

Make a reconnaissance mission on a tourist visa, as a tour arranged by an institute or to a conference, to assess the opportunities, make contacts and ascertain the issues.

Negotiate directly and be clear of the information required from you.

Make your status clear, e.g., student or professional (this may affect institutional costs).

Allow 3–6 months for a work/study visa to come through.

Expect to pay (though rates vary).

Keep proposals methodologically conservative and with technical relevance.

Seek assistance and advice from a range of sources, and try several approaches.

Especially for the social sciences, be adaptive and seek niche opportunities, including outside the agricultural research sector (e.g., try sociology or geography departments of universities and research centres).

Identify a topic that is of relevance to Cuba today.

suggested by the author based on her experiences. These would of course change depending on the situation, the people involved, and the era.

Happily, today, Cuba is a different place in terms of its interaction and relationships with other countries, and logistics, communications and data availability have all improved. Yet whilst many of the experiences described above are no longer relevant, more than a trace still lingers, as the country continues to accustom itself to the expectations and perspectives of foreign researchers curious to explore this legendary island and its people.

Notes

1. Wright (2009).
2. This support was unwitting. During the first year of my doctoral research, an EU funding officer noted my project and announced that had they understood that Cuba was the focus, it would not have been selected.
3. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 brought an abrupt end to its strong economic ties with Cuba, and with this went the inputs that Cuba had relied upon to maintain its highly industrialised system of agriculture – the petrol, machinery, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, as well as a large proportion of its food imports.
4. Wright (2009).
5. Cooperatives for Agricultural Production.
6. Cooperatives for Credit and Services.
7. Cooperatives of Basic Production Units.
8. Permission for a study in Guantanamo province was turned down, the area being a restricted-zone national park.
9. The Rural Livelihoods Framework developed in the mid-1990s in an attempt to better portray the complexities of rural life and farming activities, and their internal and external influences and driving factors. It was championed by the Institute of Development Studies (Scoones 1998) and taken up and promoted by the UK Department for International Development.
10. The State food collection and distribution agency.
11. The Cuban organic movement had taken an approach of working behind the scenes, and so whilst it made enormous advances during the 1990s, its impact was not so visible, at the end of the 1990s, when the government was pushing for farming approaches that maximised production, the organic message of optimising production could be seen to be at odds with State policy. In addition, the movement had garnered a lot of international interest and support which may have set up rivalries and threats of foreign influence.

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