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Cuba's Food and Sugar Production Remain Below Expectations Despite Reforms

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Obtaining food remains a cause for daily concern in Cuban homes because of insufficient domestic food production despite agricultural reforms and plans of President Raúl Castro’s government to spend a record US$1.9 billion this year for purchases on the international market, where prices have increased dramatically.

Cuba imports 80% of the food it consumes, including grains, rice, milk powder, soybeans, and meat, while authorities are promoting the use of idle lands and the sale of farm equipment and offering better prices for agricultural products. Last year, the country spent US$1.6 billion on those imports, of which 42% was devoted to animal feed.

Castro spearheaded reforms in agriculture and in the sugar sector, allowing for greater participation by the private sector. In addition to relocating surplus state labor forces, restructuring in the last three years has cut more than a half-million jobs. However, production has not rebounded to the magnitude expected by the population.

For 2013, Cuba's Ministerio de Economía y Planificación (MEP) projects that the agricultural sector will grow by 4.5%, while the sugar industry will increase by 21.7%.

Uncertainty on the tables
Since late 2012, residents in Havana and other cities have complained about the lack of meat products, evident in the disconnected coolers in the markets and the long lines of customers when supplies arrive. The unstable food supply shows the similarity between Cuba's current domestic situation and that of its closest political ally, Venezuela.

"The ration book is insufficient and food has to be 'invented' in other ways," says Josefina, a mother of a Havana family, referring to the monthly allocations from the government, which now provides a few mouthfuls for a week. The book includes ten eggs a month, a few ounces of chicken and coffee, daily bread, rice, black beans, salt, sugar, and oil.

Prices in the farmers' markets of private vendors are accessible to people who receive remittances from abroad or have higher incomes. Their clients are usually Cubans with ties to tourism, foreigners, diplomats, or Cuban Americans from Florida. In contrast, at the state-run farmers' markets, the supply is often poor, unstable, and of low quality. In both markets, people complain that the vendors swindle their customers using dishonest scales.

"Food prices are constantly increasing," complains Isidora Sánchez, who purchases half the food consumed by her family on the black market, which takes two-thirds of the household income consisting of two salaries of US$20 a month, the average figure for the state sector.

Cheese, eggs, butter, yogurt, ham, and fish are true delicacies in Havana and are sold by street vendors while dodging the police. Beef and lobster are banned products, and their sale is severely
punished by the authorities. The population presumes that many of these products are stolen from farms, factories, state warehouses, and hotels.

From 1998 to 2012, the domestic situation of Cubans with relatives abroad was eased thanks to food shipments sent from outside without paying customs duties (NotiCen, March 26, 1998). During this period, authorities allowed the entry of food without paying tariffs to alleviate the aftermath of three hurricanes in 2008 that caused losses estimated at US$10 billion dollars. However, the tariffs were reimposed in June, giving rise to expressions of popular discontent.

Cubans have moved beyond the times of dramatic food shortages in the 1990s when the disappearance of the Soviet Union deprived the island of credit, petroleum, food, and considerable subsidies. Paradoxically, these hardships turned out to be positive for the health of the Cuban public because of the reduction of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, according to a study published this month in the British Medical Journal showing comparisons of health indicators collected from the Cuban population over three decades.

The publication indicated that, during that time of severe crisis, considered to be the worst faced by the island in its history, caloric intake decreased from 3,000 calories to 2,200 per person, resulting in an average weight loss of 5.5 kg per person between 1991 and 1995. The diffusion of this research was bitterly received by Cubans on and outside the island because it ignores the lingering consequences of poor nutrition, such as neuropathy.

**Sugar harvest without good prospects**

The set of reforms implemented by Castro are not showing good indicators for the harvest (NotiCen, March 22, 2012). The current milling season will end in May, but so far results suggest that it will be difficult to achieve an output superior to that of the 2011-2012 harvest, because of organizational problems, lack of demand, and insufficient supply of cane for the mills, indicates Granma, the official newspaper.

The Cuban sugar industry reached its most critical moment in 2009-2010 when production declined to 1.1 million tons, the worst in 105 years. Since then, production has been modest, with an increase of 7% and 16% in the subsequent two harvests. The goal this year is to reach 1.7 million tons of raw sugar following the 1.4 million tons harvested in 2012.

Of the country's more than 150 sugar mills in operation until early this century, a total of 50 are now participating in the harvest under the direction of the Grupo Empresarial de la Agroindustria Azucarera (AZCUBA), an institution that replaced the former ministry of sugar, whose disappearance in 2011 was considered a definite sign of this historical sector's loss of importance on the island (NotiCen, June 27, 2002).

Most Cuban sugar mills were built before Fidel Castro came to power, and, in the decade between 1970 and 1980, eight new plants were constructed. From having been the island's main export in the 19th century and part of the 20th century, sugar now accounts for about 5% of the foreign currency earned by the nation. Cuba allocated 600,700 tons of sugar for local consumption and sells 400,000 tons to China.

Raúl Castro has expanded the search for foreign investments to support the sugar industry, which was closed to foreign participation for half a century. The aim is to undertake a modernization to incorporate new technologies and increase exports.
Miraculous Moringa

For decades, Fidel Castro’s government tested many new ideas for large-scale agriculture, which were subsequently considered arbitrary, unsuitable for the climate, and not beneficial for farmers. However, a new initiative was launched in 2012 for growing Moringa oleifera as a miraculous alternative for human and animal consumption. Castro has been photographed with the plants and says that they are part of his diet.

Originally from India, Moringa is praised by Castro because it contains all the amino acids and dozens of medicinal properties. The planting of the shrub has already begun in several provinces and its use in developing a new energy drink was announced. The emergence of the tree in the fields of Cuba has been taken by some as a desperate governmental hope to strengthen the diet of the population, but for others it is just another eccentric episode by the former president.

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