



# Increasing Food Sovereignty with Urban Agriculture in Cuba



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## Introduction

With the land reform of 2008 and the 'Lineamientos' of 2011, the Cuban government has aimed to support agriculture in order to reduce imports and to increase national food production.

Urban agriculture plays an important role to improve food supply for the urban population, as 75% of the Cuban population lives in urban areas.

The aim of this research was to assess the impact of the reforms on urban food producers, their agricultural activities and the potential of the policy measures to improve food sovereignty in Cuba.

## Methods

The field research was conducted in cooperation with the Cuban INIFAT (Institute of Fundamental Investigations in Tropical Agriculture).

15 urban farmers were selected by using snowball-sampling, after the INIFAT provided the initial contacts. The research methods comprised semi-structured interviews, complemented by direct observation and photographic documentation.

Transcribed interviews were coded with the software Dedoose and analyzed by qualitative content analysis.

## Results

Policy reforms included extending the area under cultivation by facilitating access to land and other resources, facilitating credits, decentralization and diversification of sales channels. Furthermore, the 'Lineamientos' tried to facilitate education and training for producers. Due to the reforms respondents could increase their production area and hence also increase the yield but monetary farm income only increased slightly. Respondents stated that producing for home consumption was important due to high food prices at official markets. For the interviewees the reforms signify improvement, but mainly in theory.

Cuban policy measures contributed to the six pillars of food sovereignty:

### • Focusing on food for people

Policy measures gave priority to the sustenance of communities. Access to food for the Cuban population was guaranteed through the diversification of marketing channels (Fig.1), higher productivity and increasing yields.

### • Valuing food providers

The government has established a national incentive system to value the work of urban producers (Fig. 2).

### • Localizing food systems

Soon after the collapse to the Socialist Block, the government started to support urban agriculture and thereby localized food production, distribution and consumption (Fig.3).

### • Putting control locally

Policy measures reduced state interference and increased local autonomy for decision making (Fig.4).

### • Building knowledge and skills

Advisory services, farmer-to-farmer extension, field visits (Fig.5) and farmers' experimentation contributed to build farming knowledge and skills.

### • Working with nature

Governmental institutions promote agro-ecological farming practices for urban food production to increase resilience and to minimize health risks for the population (Fig.6).

## Discussion

Although urban agriculture in Cuba is one of the most highlighted examples of urban food production and distribution worldwide, there are considerable drawbacks to be mentioned. Apart from the importance of the black market for agricultural inputs, bureaucratic obstacles constraining access to land and farmers' autonomy and the contradictions about agrochemical usage and advances in agroecology, there are also bottlenecks in transportation and industrial food processing.

The changes in the US-Cuban relationship will most probably have an impact on agricultural policy in the medium and long term. How the thawing relations affect urban agriculture and the food sovereignty achievements remains an open-ended question.

## Conclusion

For the Cuban government, food sovereignty is directly linked to the reduction of food imports to increase the state's independence from other countries. Fostering the use of local resources and thereby reducing imported inputs was perceived as a key factor for local food production. Though, for the producers, food sovereignty also implied independence from the state food distribution system; for example, by increasing self-sufficiency.



Fig.1: "Carretilleros" are reselling fruits and vegetables in the streets of Havana (now forbidden) (Foto: S. Schneider)



Fig.2: Urban producer showing his certificates for excellent production (Foto: D. Witzeneder)



Fig.3: Direct sales of vegetables at an urban farm in Havana (Foto: S. Schneider)



Fig.4: Collective decision making in an urban agriculture cooperative (Foto: F. Leitgeb)



Fig.5: Urban farmer explaining wormiculture to other farmers (Foto: F. Leitgeb)



Fig.6: Agroforestry combined with agro-ecological and highly diversified production (Foto: C.R. Vogl)

## Full paper with references:

Leitgeb, F., Schneider, S., Vogl C.R. (2016): Increasing food sovereignty with urban agriculture in Cuba. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 33 (2), pp 415-426