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ON THE ISLAND IT IS CALLED THE “SEARCH”

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EDITORIAL

THE FIGHT FOR WHAT TO EAT A MIDST THE PANDEMIC

As in other countries, the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Cuba resulted in not only impacts on people's health; it also exacerbated several of the already existing problems. In the case of Cuba, the health crisis added to the country's pre-existing economic problems, while also triggering a crisis of severe shortages of food and basic necessities. This is not an unforeseen problem, between 2011 and 2016 state investment in agriculture corresponded to a fifth of what was invested in tourism, however it has been especially serious that the shortage has come in the midst of a pandemic that has put the health and income of the people on the island at risk.

In the midst of a pandemic and facing the shortage of food, those who are in charge of cultivating the land, the *guajiros*, are facing the challenge of producing food without the machinery necessary for its cultivation, and in many cases, even without the animals that could fulfill that function. If they manage to overcome this first obstacle, they must submit to the Cuban regime's restrictions on the sale of the products they grow: reserving part of the production to sell it to Acopio, the state institution in charge, at prices that are lower than the market rate. If they ignore this mandate, the farmers risk being hit with administrative and criminal sanctions that include the expropriation of their lands.

The outlook for consumers looking for essential items in stores is no better. As a measure to mitigate the crisis, the Díaz-Canel government has allowed some stores to start selling goods using the "Freely Convertible Currency" or MCL. To have access to these products the consumer had to pay with foreign currencies. However, this measure is far from being a solution, since neither the stores that take Cuban Pesos



nor the stores using MCL have been able to provide enough to satisfy the demand for basic products. Furthermore, this has created deep inequalities between the minority who have the privilege of accessing remittances from abroad and those that do not, since only the former have access to the MCL shops.

In the face of the crisis, Cuban men and women have had to use their creativity to try to replace the missing products. In the absence of toothpaste, they have resorted to baking soda and soap in order to maintain minimal hygiene conditions. Faced with the shortage of chicken, they have been forced to pay the surcharge from resellers or to buy pork, the only meat available in stores, for twice its usual price.

Added to all of the above are the difficulties derived from state repression that the regime has not suspended even in the midst of the current health and food crisis. The long lines to enter the stores have police surveillance and individuals, the *coleros* (people who hold places in line for others), who have not hesitated to use force in the face of conflicts that arise between those who are waiting. In addition, Cubans are subject to the surveillance of the authorities, who do not hesitate to accuse any person who exceeds the permitted quantity of regulated products in their possession as a "hoarder."

In this issue of Rewriting Cuba, Cuban men and women tell us about the difficulties they have had to face in order to produce and obtain food and other basic necessities on the island during the pandemic and while also circumventing the repressive measures of the Cuban regime.

Juliana Domínguez

THE INVISIBLE TRUTHS OF FARMERS' LIVES IN CUBA

ROBERTO RODRÍGUEZ CARDONA

“It looks very nice and it seems easy, even though the life of a farmer is hard wherever you stand”

“It looks very nice and it seems easy, even though the life of a farmer is hard wherever you stand,” he said suddenly when he saw me taking a photograph of his field.”-

But damn ... the Cuban peasants have had the worst luck.” Apparently, he saw on my face some look of astonishment and continued. “Come on over to the fence and look under that bush, then surely you will understand me.”

This is how my eyes were opened to a new truth, that although in plain sight, not all of us could see. Venancio Góngora Téllez was born in the heart of the mountains around Guisa in the Sierra Maestra. His seventy-three years of working the land have made him a respected insider on the matter.

“Before, if you put in the effort and sacrifice, you were able to live perfectly with what you were able to plant..., today even if you work like a slave, to make a profit from a harvest you have to be a magician.”

Apart from the fact that you have to deal with the climate, drought or mud, pests, thieves, the lack of appropriate clothing, resources and work tools and the need to take care of the animals; we also have to deal with bureaucracy, non-compliance

issues, inconsideration and impositions of the government. “Because (the regulations) on paper are one thing and the reality is something very different,” he adds.

Theoretically, the farmers must comply and sell a considerable part of their harvest to the State at ridiculously low prices compared to the final price they will be sold at. In exchange for your paying tribute, the Government agrees to provide you with a “Technology Package” to guarantee production, which includes quality seeds, fuel, fumigation and fertilization products, irrigation guarantees, plowing equipment, plowing and harvesting machinery, among other things. As an additional option they offer crop insurance. The rest of the harvest must remain at the disposal of its producer, but its sale to individuals and the self-employed is also subject to regulations.

“They (the state marketers) come and contract the harvest from you and promise you the package, but everything is a lie, we have to put up with hardship for them to authorize it

and, even then, there is no guarantee that they will provide you with anything, we continue like the Indigenous people did, plowing with other people’s oxen, sowing what turns up and harvesting by hand. We

“If you put in the effort and sacrifice, you were able to live perfectly with what you were able to plant...”



Photo by Roberto Rodríguez Cardona

have to solve the seed ourselves or buy it on the black market and if the harvest suffers some damage, you can hardly ever count on the insurance being paid and asking for a loan from the bank means you will be in debt for the rest of your life.”

“In order to cultivate here you have to rent oxen or tractors, buy fuel, pay day-laborers, guarantee them snacks and lunch, find the means of work, rent backpacks and buy chemicals (for fumigation), among other expenses. There are also thieves, who not only steal your harvest

and animals... they take everything... whatever they can... and if they take the oxen and other animals, even if it is not your fault and the animal is lost, you have to pay for this loss to the State anyway”.

“Ah..., and when it comes to what you have left over from the harvest, be careful about selling it to individuals or the self-employed, because they can accuse you of illicit enrichment and confiscate the rest and even the lands and properties if you are someone that has the land through usufruct. Even a legal case can be held

over your head,” he adds.

Today very few farmers even have their own team of oxen. Their earnings, diminished by high prices, can barely cover their own needs and the preparations needed for a new harvest. Acquiring a basic tractor, went from being a longed for dream to a kind of unattainable madness.

But the difficulties do not end with the harvest, moving the harvest to its storage site can become an odyssey on its own. Without the possibility of acquiring their own transportation, they must rent something at exorbitant prices and deal with dirt roads that are sometimes impassable due to mud and overall neglect.” And you cannot leave the crops in the field because they will be stolen or you will be forced to let it spoil while waiting for the State to collect its share.”

“For this reason, in these times no one wants to work the soil... not even our own children, who in the long run are the ones who are going to inherit the land,” laments the farmer, while wringing the sweat out of his straw hat. “The lack of motivation for agricultural work is leading to the depopulation of the mountains”.

“But wait, I’ll give you a bunch of plantains and some yuccas.” I was going to try to reply but again his words silenced me, “after this conversation, you are sure to appreciate them more than those you have been so far.”

“...today even if you work like a slave, to make a profit from a harvest you have to be a magician”.

FIGURING OUT WHAT TO EAT



Amarilis Rey

All the existing mechanisms to achieve what it means to bring something to the table is more difficult at the moment due to the scarcity of supplies and the increase in the price of basic necessities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the challenge for the vast majority of Cubans on the island: to figure out what to eat.

Even though the police try to prevent it, groups of people are wandering around the shops from the crack of dawn looking for the last place to stand in the lines, which then turn into small riots when the time comes to open up.

These stores, if they are stocked, offer the

products that are in the greatest demand: chicken, packages of sausages, yogurt, butter, oil and others in the convertible currency, the so-called CUC (Cuban convertible peso), or at the exchange rate of 25 Cuban pesos –CUP to 1 CUC.

The people snap up the goods in these shops, where the price a liter of soybean oil costs 50 CUP and the smallest package of chicken thighs costs about 85 CUP, despite the fact that according to official figures, the average salary in Cuba is sli-

ghtly more of 800 CUP per month. For this reason, they must be getting some support in the form of remittances sent by relatives from abroad or have access to some kind of extra income on the side. On the island this is often simply called the “search.”

However, the pandemic has created a solution for some. Due to the pandemic, the distribution of goods in these places has been regulated, as a general rule, at two units per person with the right to purchase them once a week, so those who have little money to buy both products, and then resell one at a higher price to those who can afford to pay for both and are not willing to wait for hours in one of those lines in which many times there are heated debates or arguments.

Then there is the new option, the dollar stores. They work with a type of debit card where cash from friends or family can be deposited abroad. They are located in central places in the cities and offer a greater variety of quality products at prices that, according to popular opinion, are prohibitive for the vast majority of Cubans. And this is despite the fact that the islanders who receive monetary aid from abroad constitute a minority of the population.

Although all of this coincided with the pandemic, in reality this has been the result of new measures implemented through the government’s economic policies.

For their part, the state run farmers’ markets offer a variety of products that are unable to satisfy the demand, so long lines



Photo by Cuba Raw

are common in these places lines, which on many occasions results in things being in disarray and angry discussions over a few pounds of potatoes, bananas or beans, among other things.

Along the same lines, there are the stalls of private individuals, who try and sell the same products in private markets at a higher price, except for potatoes because their sale is forbidden. However, they are closely monitored and persecuted by state inspectors and by the police themselves.

For everyone at the end of the line, there is the “basic food basket” available through the ration book, which provide a meager amount of products at guaranteed lower prices, so that many poor Cubans on the island can at least have something on the table to eat for one week a month.

INEQUALITY BETWEEN THE MLC AND THE CUC

NIOBER GARCÍA FOURNIER

*Inequality was
institutionalized in Cuban
society*

With the expansion of the novel coronavirus surging across the world, the global economy has recently experienced a general crisis, and our country was not spared from it. When this crisis reached the island in July of this year, the Cuban regime took some economic measures to minimize its effect. One of the measures concerned retail sales in Freely Convertible Currency (MLC) within a network of 72 stores that were created for this service, the eradication of the 10% dollar tax, the creation of small and medium enterprises (state and non-state ones) with exporting and importing capacities and the improvement of the non-state sector by removing some obstacles, among others.

The arrival of the retail stores in MLC, however, set in place a duality of chain stores, the ones for Cuban Convertible Pesos – CUC and the ones for MLC and a trilogy of currencies (with the Cuban Peso – CUP being the third beside the CUC and MLC). Thus, inequality was institutionalized in Cuban society, since not all citizens are able to access this currency to obtain basic services; most citizens are still left outside of the dollar economy.

One major difference was quickly seen between the two types of stores in existence, in the so-called Currency Collection Stores (TRD) and between the new

MLC stores. The latter were supplied with a different level of basic necessities, most of which were collected from the TRDs at the beginning of the crisis. Government leaders in Havana alleged that these goods were necessary to attract hard currencies essential for the purchase on international markets of some products and raw materials vital for the people. Therefore, the so-called TRDs were facing shortages throughout the country of just about everything to the point that almost all of them sold only 4 or 5 products.

Juan, a 79-year-old retiree from Guantánamo, with a pension of 260 CUP (at the official exchange rate 10.4 CUC) doesn't have access to foreign currency, confirmed that he barely uses the stores that use CUC, which are also known as TRD shops, since the last time he went to one he had to wait in a long queue even before entering, there were only a few goods for sale, some detergent, cloth for mopping floors, disposable napkins and two types of honey.

Not all citizens are able to access MLC to obtain basic services

The Cuban State has not had the capacity to maintain the supply for the two types of purchasing options, so the TRDs have been left out of the supply chain, and with this began rationing and the crowds of people that were forced to buy the few products that these establishments offer. While the few citizens who have hard currency do not have to go through any of the afore mentioned hassles, because with this option there is

neither rationing nor the crowds. On the contrary, in this new type of commercial establishments [that take MLC], good service reigns supreme and there are ample products that can be obtained within them.

Odális, a 35-year-old woman who receives money from the United States, said: “On the one hand, the dollar stores are good because they contain almost all the basic necessities that are needed at home, and products such as the ham (serrano) and various types of beef, which are no longer available in the CUC stores, but the bad thing is that for the Cubans who do not receive remittances, they have to buy their dollar at 1.65 CUC [on the black

market] to be able to enter these stores,” she concluded.

Even without the approval of the majority of the people in Cuba, the regime has resorted to this form of sale with the intention of facing the difficult situation, because this new system of offers in MLC the one who is benefiting the most is the government itself, which is obliged to seek convertible currencies that allow it to access the international market in order to be able to make purchases of food, raw materials and other items necessary for feeding the people and for the operation of the island’s economy.

This new system of offers in MLC the one who is benefiting the most is the government itself



Photo by Cuba Raw

EVERYTHING IS MISERABLE



Cristóbal Benemélis Frómeta

"To buy food you have to become a ninja, when they take out some chicken the queues are endless and there have been people checking for days, I don't know how they find out"

Juana María Cortina is an accountant for a subsidiary of the Cuban State Trading Company in Guantánamo, she has a 21-year-old daughter and the only salary that comes into the house is hers, which is about 390 CUP in the national currency (CUP - Cuban Pesos)." The outlook for what it takes to live in this country is bleak," says Juana, referring to the question of how to buy food.

With the COVID situation, life for Cubans has radically changed, although this state employee affirms that the crisis that the island has been experiencing existed already before the arrival of the pandemic. "Before COVID arrived there was almost

nothing in the stores, one miraculous day they brought out some chicken, then it disappeared again, this also happened with the cooking oil, detergent, and personal hygiene products," she says.

Everything has been getting worse on account of the measures that the government has been announcing, as witnessed by this 48-year-old woman. "To buy food you have to become a ninja, when they take out some chicken the queues are endless and there have been people checking for days, I don't know how they find out. Agricultural products have had very high prices since they announced that they would raise wages, there was no ex-

planation given about the fact that the vendors and warehouse workers have been putting exorbitant prices on food. On the other hand, meat has pretty much been downright nonexistent; the traditional places where people sold it illegally have disappeared like the 7 Sur, La Línea, 9 Norte, the police are constantly shutting them down.



Photo by Cuba Raw

During the COVID period, the people of Guantánamo, as on the rest of the island, have had the idea of selling their things from home through social networks, but this was met by a response from the authorities. "We were resolving this by selling things on Revolico, the most popular online classified ads, in Guantánamo, but they began to persecute everyone who sold something on Facebook, the police were even pretending to be customers who wanted something and when they arrived at the address to pick up the product that they requested on Facebook Messenger they were waiting there. There are people being locked up for that reason. Repeat offenders and many others received high fines of up to \$3,000 Cuban pesos," describes the accountant.

Juana breaks down a list of the prices [in CUP] of products at the moment that chip away at the salary she earns. Malanga: \$25, Sweet Potatoes: \$12, Yuca: \$17, Garlic: \$6 per head, Red Beans: \$45, Rice: \$20, Cooking Oil: \$150 for a large contain-

er, a jar of chilies: \$10, Pork: \$50, Ham: \$75, Burro Bananas: \$5 pound, Plantains: \$7 a pound.

Personal hygiene products are another headache, she says: Industrial laundry soap: \$20, store laundry soap: \$45, store bath soap: \$35, soap for mopping and cleaning floors: \$20, shampoo: \$15, conditioner: \$15, store toothpaste: \$6 CUC, deodorant: \$10 CUC, razor: \$50 CUC.

Juana states that she has always fulfilled all the tasks of the Revolution, but that she does not give more, she pays for the electricity of the house every month, about \$70 CUP, for the telephone \$50 CUP, the water \$6.60 CUP and \$12 CUP per year to the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. "I have had to sell all my clothes, as well as my shoes, just to survive. My daughter stopped studying because there is no future and work is simply not worth it, everything is miserable," she concludes.

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