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Eco-tourism and Sustainable Community Development in Cuba:  
Bringing Community Back into Development

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on community development and its relationship to eco-tourism as a means of creating a sustainable future for local Cuban communities. If communities control local resources to create economic opportunities for local goals, there is a greater chance that community development will be more effective and sustainable. Local empowerment can play a key role in community development through ecological and cultural tourism. The focus of this paper is Cuba's potential to develop into a major ecological and cultural tourism center within international tourism. Recent policy announcements regarding the intention to diversify Cuba's economy and move people into private enterprise will require new employment opportunities, especially those with lower opportunity costs and resources. The growth of small *paladares* (restaurants run by self-employed owners) and *casas particulares* (rooms for rent in private homes), which provide low environmental impact and resource use, are compatible with eco-cultural tourism's emphasis on the local. In an era of increasing environmental costs and resource scarcity, eco-cultural tourism offers a sustainable alternative to conventional tourism.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Cuba, community development, ecological-cultural tourism, sustainability

Given the important role international tourism plays in Cuba's national budget, this paper will examine the nature and role of tourism and its relationship to community development and environmental sustainability. This paper will address the issues surrounding changes taking place in Cuba that offer the potential to benefit local communities and enhance environmental awareness and protection yet remain within the discourse of the Revolution regarding social justice, efficiency, and solidarity.

Following the Cuban revolution in 1959, Cuban relations with the United States deteriorated as U.S. property and businesses were nationalized. By the end of 1960, trade relations between the U.S. and Cuba collapsed, leading Cuba to establish economic relations with the Soviet Union. Out of necessity, given U.S. antagonism and trade blockade, Cuba became economically dependent on trade with the Soviet bloc (Chomsky, 2010). With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989-1990, Cuba's special trade relationship with the USSR also collapsed, leading to a significant economic depression in Cuba, known as the Special Period (*Período especial*). Food shortages and rationing along with rolling electric blackouts were pervasive throughout the 1990s (personal interviews with J. Garcia and M. Frank in Havana, 2006-2013). The severity of the U.S. blockade and the lack of hard currency reserves in Cuba meant Cuba had to reinsert itself into the international economy by means of its internal resources. At the 1992 Earth Summit meeting in Rio de Janeiro, then-President Fidel Castro called for global environmental awareness warning, "An important biological species—humankind—is at risk of disappearing due to the rapid and progressive elimination of its natural habitat. We are becoming aware of this problem when it is almost too late to prevent it" (Marce, 2016).

Following Castro's call for environmental awareness, Cuba published a document, *Programa Nacional sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo* (PNMAD, National Program on Environment and Development) to assess environmental conditions and resources (Díaz-Briquets & Pérez-López 2000, p. 8).<sup>1</sup> Gold asserts that "sustainability, in the context of Fidel Castro's discourse, should be understood not only as an economic relationship to nature, and a political discourse against capitalism, but as a nationalist banner for an ever-transformative Revolution" (2014, p. 412). Due to a lack of agro-chemicals, tractors, and fuel, a shift from industrial agriculture to organic farming and urban gardens operationalized Castro's environmental message. The transformation was not exclusively born of necessity but also reflected early Revolutionary ideas about the relationship between nature and humanity (Bell, 2011; Whittle & Santos, 2006). Following Castro's message, a policy linking the environment and international tourism developed as a means to secure foreign currency (Feinberg & Newfarmer, 2016).

Today's global environmental crises requires development that is sustainable but also meets the basic needs of local communities for healthy ecosystems. An important ingredient for community development, according to Pérez Sáinz and Andrade-Eekhoff, is the degree of what they refer to as 'social integration' (2003). Social integration includes low poverty rates and access to education and social services provided by government. Thus, the government plays a crucial role in local development, but it is the community or localized social movements that should determine how and the degree to which the community is inserted into the national and global market. Given its relatively unspoiled environment, high educational achievement, environmental awareness, and limited resources, Cuba is in a unique position to expand a model beyond resort tourism, allowing for community-based, sustainable development that focuses on ecological and cultural tourism. Such a transformation would support emergent discourses on environmental sustainability, self-reliance, and nation building (Gold, 2014, p. 410).

## Development and Economic Change

Over the last several decades, an on-going debate has focused on the most effective means of reaching improved economic conditions in emerging economies (see Lin, 2012; Roseland, 2000; Gannon, 2009). In the 1950s, the focus was on structural change and institution building, to be followed in the 1970s by the Washington Consensus, emphasizing efforts to encourage emerging economies to participate in the free market—reflecting the ideologies of the capitalist market economy and neoliberal ideals. Mowforth and Munt define neoliberalism as a “hegemonic discourse that originates from, and is largely fashioned by, First World dominated global institutions, governments, agencies and academe,” in which economic growth is the foundation of progress, *i.e.*, wealth creation (2009, pp. 32, 38-39). Such development seeks out foreign investment opportunities in emerging economies, in which the investor nations ultimately benefit from low-income nations’ comparative advantage such as cheap labor, access to resources, or limited environmental regulations. For example, the *maquiladora* industrial zone on the U.S.-Mexican border includes several thousand assembly plants employing thousands of laborers under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed in 1994. Billions of dollars have been invested in the creation of this sector of the globalizing economy utilizing cheap Mexican labor, with questionable benefit to the Mexican communities. Many observers have pointed out that the *maquila* zone development in Tijuana, Mexico, has failed to find the benefits of ‘trickle-down’ development amidst the working poor, thus exacerbating outmigration to the United States (see, for example, Salas, 2002; Vilas, 1999; Edmonds, 2012 for the Caribbean).

Effective economic development at the community level focuses less on national economic growth and more on the conditions allowing the community to determine its own economic opportunities given its resources. In other words, the goal should be not on creating the proper market conditions to create wealth exclusively but on developing among communities a sense of empowerment so that they can take control of their own collective fates, meeting their basic needs in an equitable manner (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Dehoorne & Tătar, 2013). Additionally, whereas neoliberal economic prescriptions tend to focus on individual initiative and effort, community development is more inclusive and focused on all community members as stakeholders in development<sup>2</sup> (Maser, 1996).

The foundation of such development includes participatory, democratic action that is, where practical, inclusive of all community stakeholders in project planning and implementation. Sustainable development recognizes the necessity of a healthy physical environment and a reliance on renewable local resources for future generations. Such development is less about making profit and monetary wealth and more about quality of life and the richness of a vibrant interdependency of community members. Joppe suggests that the meaning of community is one based on acknowledged common purpose, values, and heritage by a community’s members (1996, p. 475; Maser, 1996; Roseland, 2005). “Behind this principle of solidarity confided in the Constitution itself,” write Veltmeyer and Rushton, “is the notion of the moral (and instrumental) duty and the readiness of all members of society (both in Cuba and the world) to ensure the well-being of the collectivity and to share more equitably in the product of collective economic enterprise” (2012, p. 240). The idea of social solidarity and common purpose as a defining principle of the Revolution remains resident in Cuba today.

### Sustainable Community Development

Harrison, et al. define sustainable development (SD) as the “management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems” (2003). Based on her research in Cuba, Stricker adds that sustainable development must include the idea of and structure for social justice, linking community and environmental health and protection. Stricker defines social justice as meeting the basic needs of civil society, including food security, education, and health care, as well as concern for the whole person, goals that have been in place as official discourse of the Revolution (2010, p. 186; Veltmeyer & Rushton, 2012, p. 72; Gold, 2014). Stricker adds, “Sustainable development fundamentally tackles how we live our lives and how goods and resources are distributed within a society and globally” (p. 186). Cuba has developed a “model of development that balances human needs with environmental protection, and a legal framework to ensure that these principles are followed” (pp. 195-197). Holden and Linnerud add that sustainability must also include inter- and intra-generational equity; that is, the present generation must not constrain or limit future generations from meeting their basic and environmental needs as well (2007, pp. 175, 178). Roseland concurs that development must go beyond growth and incorporate “an inescapable commitment to social equity” and the “fair distribution of environmental benefits and costs between generations” (2005, p. 3).

In general, what SD promotes is the protection and enhancement of opportunities for the future. Adding the community component into the SD equation necessitates the balance of interests between the host community, those visiting the community, and the policies of government. Sustainable community development moves beyond the imperatives or ideology of the capitalist economic market to include not only environmental concerns but also concerns for the social and cultural health that enhance the wellbeing of the entire “ecological” community. Such development must also devolve power and planning down to the community if the community is to become an active agent in program development and management. Barbier argues that “real improvements cannot occur unless the strategies which are being formulated and implemented are ecologically sustainable over the long term, are consistent with social values and institutions, and encourage ‘grassroots’ participation in the development process” (1987, p.109). Thus, an important component of community development must include the means of “empowerment,” a condition problematic in Cuba, where the state maintains effective control over most aspects of the economy and society. It is, however, at the local level where resources can be employed to most effectively to take advantage of emerging economic and environmental opportunities.

The tourist industry in Latin America and the Caribbean is associated with market-based, capital-intensive resort tourism (Momsen, 1998, pp. 118-120; Grandoit, 2005). From Guana-caste in Costa Rica to Cancun, Mexico and the various Sandals resorts peppering the small islands of the Caribbean (St. Lucia, St. Vincent, etc.), along with the presence of the Spanish tourist conglomerate Melia in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, massive tourist operations are significant features of development (for Cuba see, González, et. al, 2013). However, such development’s backward linkages into the domestic economy is problematic. For Cuba, according to Feinberg and Newfarmer, linkage effects are less than in other countries of the Caribbean such as in the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica but also offer only half as much in direct benefits (2016, p. 22-23).

Tourism is a global growth industry, and ecologically- and culturally-based tourism is at the forefront of such growth (WTTC, 2015). In the creation or expansion of protected parks and

preserves to attract tourists, local communities are often forced to conform to outside expectations and roles. As an outcome of the differential power displayed in these relationships, “Ecotourism works to create simplistic images of local people and their uses and understanding of their surroundings” (p. 262). Locals may then feel pressure, for instance, to modify their crafts in order to sell to the tourist or may feel impelled to serve, themselves, as a sort of exotic, “living exhibit.” West et al., point out that unless there is a constructive relationship between the sponsors of tourist conservation and host communities, locals and surrounding nature risk becoming commodities for ecotourism marketing (2006, p. 257). At issue is how to coordinate national planning initiatives with local governance and control over the development process. Koens et al. stress the that “participants and population should have a sense of ownership and understanding of these policies and their implementation,” further stating that “local entrepreneurship in the tourism industry should be high, and local culture should be integrated in tourists’ activities.” Significantly, they caution, “It is easier to meet these conditions if tourism is small scale and community based” (2009, p. 1235).

Such outcomes may be more attainable depending on a number of factors such as state involvement and services, the socio-economic development of the community, and, if an indigenous culture is involved, its integration into the broader social system. For example, the Bri Bri Talamanca Indigenous Reserve along the Yorquin River in Costa Rica illustrates an example of an empowered community using ecotourism (along with organic cocoa and banana cultivation) as a cultural development tool. Ecotourism is completely controlled by the Bri Bri not only for income but as a means of maintaining and expanding their culture, traditions, and history, according to community elder B. Morales (personal interview, May 2015). In a second Bri Bri community in the small village of Shiroles, ACOMUITA (Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas de Talamanca) operates an organic cocoa plantation that also hosts ecotourists to learn about chocolate production and Bri Bri culture. These communities exemplify the meaning of sustainable development since they are locally controlled and determined independent of the state or outside institutions.

Alternatives to mass commercialized tourism encompass more than just experiencing nature through ecotourism. About an hour from Havana is the village of Las Terrazas, located in Cuba’s Sierra del Rosario Mountains. Founded in 1971, it is a model for sustainable development, including tourism. Many residents work in tourism, environmental education, and art and craft production and welcome tourist visitations. Situated nearby is the Ecological Research Station involved in environmental education and restoration. Due to forest restoration efforts, Las Terrazas was designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1985. An early visit in 2001 found a quiet community, somewhat off the tourist route, but today, Las Terrazas is a significant cultural attraction with new hotels, restaurants serving local food, ruins of a coffee plantation, and a zip line experience.

### **The Decentralization of Tourism and Experience**

The term ecotourism suggests intimate contact with and understanding of the role, condition, and relationship of nature with its human occupants. One aspect of ecotourism is cultural tourism, in which the primary feature is the understanding of the cultural context of host community and people, including their history, artistic expressions, ways of living, and contemporary issues. Both terms are associated with community development since social organization, cul-

tural values, and heritage are integrated not only with their natural environment but also with external social factors such as government, institutions, and broader patterns of change.

While ecotourism is not a total solution to development and can exacerbate existing social stratification or struggles over resources, as outlined by Horton's *Buying Up Nature* (2009; see also Mowforth & Munt, 2006; West et al., 2006; Honey, 2003), it does offer the potential for new opportunities within a context of local resources and community organization. It is important, however, that the state allow the community to create its own conditions, as Pérez Sáinz and Andrade-Eekhoff point out, to make possible the successful, controlled insertion of the community into the global or broader national economy (2003). Ideally, the construction of eco-friendly structures minimizes the impact on the land, trees, and animal habitat. At the same time, businesses are encouraged to utilize biodegradable and local building materials as well as purchased goods from local farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. Waste products, especially food items, can find further use in the community as animal feed or for composting. The effect of such actions is to create backward linkages into the local economy providing employment and less expensive inputs, allowing others to buy in as stakeholders to the idea of eco-cultural tourist development.

Cuba had an estimated four million visitors in 2016, with most concentrated in the capital, Havana, and several other locations such as Varadero, Trinidad, Pinar del Río, and the *Jardines de la Reina* marine park. Dispersal creates more opportunity for more local people over a wider area. This can have a synergistic effect of creating more service employment and clusters of independent economic activity. In Cuba's Pinar del Río Province, for example, lies the town of Viñales with *casas particulares* (rooms for rent in private homes), lined one after another along the main street into town. Side streets find more *casas* and small shops popular with tourists.

Staying at Casa Nora's illustrates the contribution of such an establishment to the local economy. Feinberg and Newfarmer's research suggests that commercialized hotels leak 18 percent of their revenues to import foreign food and beverages (2016, p. 26). Nora's meals comprise local produce, and the added second floor employed local labor and materials, keeping most revenue local. Most *casas* are simple homes with basic rooms to rent. Nora, like the hosts of other *casas*, strives to present a Cuban experience to her visitors (personal interview, 2015). When asked why she decided to open her home to tourists, she said it was a way to make money but added that interacting and sharing her country with visitors was a great achievement. A discussion with the owner of a small, newly opened *palador* (self-owned restaurant) off the main street in Viñales illustrates the difficulties faced by *cuentalpropistas* (self-employed micro-enterprises). The owner had no access to credit and had to purchase restaurant equipment piecemeal when money or opportunity was available. Her biggest obstacle was meeting onerous tax obligations, a fixed amount regardless of business revenue, and a monthly license fee (see also Feinberg, 2013; Kolopic, 2016). The government has yet to institute a system of credit loans for such small establishments according to this individual.

Traveling east to Trinidad, a stay at a *casa particular*, Hostal Marlin y Tati in the small seaside village of La Boca, the experience is replicated. Discussion with the hosts over the meaning of such *casas* uncovers two points: First, running a *casa* provides casa owners with a sense of empowerment they believe they have over their lives as entrepreneurs and business owners. Second, *casas* reinforce both the need for and desire of individuals to be integrated into their communities by providing economic opportunities for other locals. A common refrain expressed by Nora and Marlin is that current Cuban leader, Raul Castro's<sup>3</sup> attempts at decentraliz-

ing opportunity are recognized and supported (personal interview, 2015).<sup>4</sup> Because tourist-oriented private businesses operate in CUC (convertible peso used by foreigners, one CUC = 25 Cuban pesos used by nationals), owners can earn considerably more income than the average wage earner, and thus, the *casa* owners stated, most *cuentapropistas* support Castro's economic initiatives. It is clear from such conversations that these *cuentapropistas* are redefining the meaning of their traditional relationship with the state.

The need to expand tourist alternatives in Cuba is of critical importance to the normalization of relations between Cuba and the United States. It is estimated that over the next few years, several million U.S. visitors will travel to Cuba, with a financial impact of billions of dollars. The main tourist corridor is generally filled to capacity, and the capital of Havana, especially Habana Vieja and Vedado, are likewise heavily populated by tourists. A more "authentic" or less hectic Cuba, away from the distractions of the "*jineteros*" of Havana can be found in the byways of small towns and rural communities.<sup>5</sup>

Cuba is well situated to expand its ecological-cultural tourist sector given past efforts. Like Costa Rica, Cuba has protected a considerable portion of its landmass in 263 protected areas, including six UNESCO biospheres, such as the large swamp known as *Ciénaga de Zapata* and the *Topes de Collantes* in the Escambray Mountains. The *Valle de los Ingenios* is a series of three interconnected valleys that housed numerous slave-labor sugar plantations and that has the potential to be major attraction outside Trinidad. Cuba also has unique areas such as the *Valle de Viñales* in Pinar del Rio, with its *mogotes* and caves spread along a wide, flat valley full of small tobacco farms.<sup>6</sup> These areas have the potential to become major eco-cultural tourist sites with a rich and deep natural history from pre-Columbian times through the colonial slave plantations era, offering experiences deeper into the interior of Cuba.

Research trips to Costa Rica (2008, 2011, 2015, 2016) and Cuba (2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014) suggest that a focus on coffee production policy can provide one model of development that simultaneously addresses the economic, community, environmental, and tourist concerns in any coffee producing country but specifically Cuba. Coffee production can play an integral part in ecotourism because most people enjoy coffee as a daily beverage and thus have an inherent interest in how coffee is grown. The availability of coffee plantation tours also acts as a magnet, pulling tourists away from conventional tourist sites to visit the human and natural features of the rural environment where coffee is grown and produced. Research focused on several coffee areas around Trinidad found these areas to represent opportunities for increased ecotourism. The Escambray Mountain region, the protected *Topes de Collantes*, has several coffee plantations (most coffee is grown in the Sierra Maestra Mountains near Santiago de Cuba). Situated in the *Topes de Collantes* is a small mixed Cuban and foreign tourist development, with a coffee house that sits a short distance away, where visitors can learn about coffee cultivation and processing and purchase small, handmade crafts if desired, though no coffee is for sale there at this time. There exists great potential into creating a significant tourist experience here, but the site is currently neither developed nor easily accessible.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre writes of the uniqueness of coffee in Cuba, stating, "Cuba during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in the creation of a unique cultural landscape, illustrating a significant stage in the development of this form of agriculture" (UNESCO, 2000). Cuba, with its long history of coffee production in three major regions and the cachet of Cuban coffee as a brand, is well-situated to attract tourists. Research on slavery and coffee plantations in Cuba by Singleton illustrates that old 19th century Cuban plantation ruins could be of historical interest to tourists (2001).



Costa Rica offers an example of how coffee can play a role in eco-tourism. In Costa Rica, there are many coffee plantations that not only produce coffee for export but also cater to tourists (interviews with M. Sanchez and R. Valverde, 2015, 2016). Many such plantations belong to the *Cooperativa de Café* (known as Coocafe), an association of cooperatives representing 3,500 planters and supporting more than 15,000 people (Sáenz-Segura & Zúñiga-Arias, 2008, pp. 122-125). Producing mainly organic, shade-grown arabica beans, they produce an estimated 4,100 tons of coffee, primarily for export and direct sales to tourists.

An example of the relationship between production and tourism is the cooperative Coopesarapiqui, founded in 1969, comprising 170 small producers (average two hectares each). What is unique about this cooperative is the three artificially built settling ponds that also support fish to be served in the small restaurant attached to the co-op. They also grow ornamental flowers, bananas, and organic yucca for a local processor to be made into chips. The co-op maintains two supermarkets in Limón and San Carlos, where co-op members can purchase goods at reduced cost. Sarapiqui also has its own processing mill and markets and its own coffee under the brand name Mi Cafecito. As with many similar establishments, such as micro-enterprises in Cuba, much of the material used by the cooperative is locally produced and processed. All these activities also produce supplemental businesses to supply the cooperative (personal interviews, May 2014, 2015).

Most coffee cooperatives have as general organizing principles the promotion of the social economy in their community and the protection of the environment. Coopesarapiqui and CoopeSantaElena both recycle and produce organic fertilizers from waste products sold to area farmers as part of a program of community sustainable development. Most engage in shade-grown coffee that maintains the forest canopy for wildlife habitat and in doing so create ancillary employment for the broader community during the harvest period.

Cooperatives need effective management operating through strong producer organizations, that is, collective participation in decision making, integrated with a good business model promoting solidarity and economic justice. Participation is a significant feature for the effectiveness of a community or tourist-oriented business enterprise to manage the tourist encounter. Cooperatives also require agreed-upon, transparent regulations centered on quality control and productivity. All co-op members must utilize similar production methods and realize compatible production outcomes. Additionally, many small producer organizations require access to affordable credit and extension agents for production expansion, modernization, advertisement, and marketing programs. Credit and business extension help for *cuentalpropistas* in Cuba is very limited. Kolopic remarks that there is considerable bureaucratic red tape and requirements, as a consequence of which, he says, “Cuban economists have concluded that the loan approval process is skewed to significantly favor those who have strong personal connections in leadership positions that can provide the necessary guarantees and help them cut through the red tape much more quickly than the ordinary citizen” (Kolopic, 2016).

The bureaucratic structure of the Cuban state can, according to a staff member at *Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas* in Havana, act as an impediment to small sector growth (personal interview, 2014). He stated that even though the 6th Party Congress reaffirmed its commitment to greater self-employment, its implementation has been uneven due in part to resistance by “bureaucratic paternalism or self-interest.” Raul Castro commented on this problem at the 7th Congress of the Communist Party stating, “The main obstacle we have faced, just as we had predicted, is the issue of outdated mentalities, which give rise to an attitude of inertia....” Inertia, rather than action, he added, is expressed when “certain individuals believed that

the problem would be solved by simply creating a document and sending it from one end of the country to the other, and requesting that cadres study it” (cubadebate.org, 2016).

### **Cuba at a Crossroads of Community and Development**

In the past several years, Cuba has witnessed a slow opening of a new relationship between government and civil society. Recognizing the need to reinvigorate a slow growth economy, President Raul Castro proclaimed at the 6th National Congress the need to create new opportunities to move government employees into an evolving private sector. Feinberg writes that the economy can be characterized as a “low-productivity service economy” with insufficient agricultural output and anemic industrial productivity (2011, p. 10). Due to the U.S. economic blockade instituted in 1960 and pressure on U.S. trading partners, Cuba’s exports are “unacceptably low for a small island economy, reflective of the low international competitiveness of much of Cuba’s industrial and agricultural sectors” (p. 13).<sup>7</sup> Due to such economic limitations, international tourist visitations play an outsized role in Cuba’s economy and government policy (Feinberg & Newfarmer 2016).

Raul Castro’s plan to reduce the state labor force is “an ongoing process. . . [that will] continue slowly but uninterruptedly, its pace determined by our capacity to create the necessary conditions for its full implementation” (Lavery, 2011, p. 36). Feinberg agrees that state policy aims at “substituting state paternalism in favor of individual responsibility, for shifting from a culture of socialist egalitarianism to an equality of rights and opportunities,” rewarding efficiency and autonomy from the state (2011, p. 16). The challenge to this policy is developing enough economic and employment opportunity while retaining the social benefits for those released from the government payroll. Raul Castro, in his 7th PCC speech, referred to the transformation underway, stating, “This premise, which corresponds to our principle that no one will be abandoned to their fate, greatly affects the speed of progress made in the process of updating the country’s economic model. . .” (cubadebate.org, 2016). In his latest research, Feinberg outlines increasing growth of *trabajadores cuentapropistas*, or small urban businesses in Cuba, during this transformation. He cites government statistics that estimate one million Cubans—or 20 percent of employed workforce—are working in the private sector, (2013, p. 8; Feinberg & Newfarmer, 2016). Today, they add, “The most popular choices are restaurants and snack shops, followed by bed and breakfasts, transportation (taxis and trucks), construction, street vendors of agricultural products, music sales (CDs), recycling, and repair of household appliances. . .” (Feinberg 2013, p. 13).<sup>8</sup> One major driver of the economy that has absorbed the economic activity listed above has been the growth of investment in the international tourist sector. One example of change is the new rules governing the Mariel Special Development Zone (ZEDM). Foreign investors will be able to contract with self-employed Cubans, and new wage rates will benefit Cuban workers (cubastandard.com, 2014).

Cuba has a history of an on-again, off-again relationship with international tourism that began in the 1920s, during the age of prohibition in the United States. The second wave of mass tourism came in the 1950s, comprising many middle-class tourists as well as various elements of organized crime (Aagesen & Paluch, 2001, p. 49). The success of the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the breaking off of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba saw tourist visitation collapse until the beginning of the Special Period (*Período especial*) in the early 1990s.<sup>9</sup> According to Pérez-López and Díaz-Briquets, by 2010, there were 559 major tourist hotels/resorts in Cuba, with almost 65,000 rooms and employing 100,000 workers (2011, p. 316;

Becker, 2011). The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) found that by 2014, this sector provided 494,500 direct and indirect jobs or 9.6 percent of total employment (WTTC, 2015, p. 4). The government's 2030 Vision Plan estimates up to 10 million foreign visitors by 2030 (Feinberg & Newfarmer, 2016, p. 1).

In the meantime, Cuba must continue to walk an uneasy path of economic development and environmental protection in the Havana-Varadero tourist development corridor. Both Varadero and Jardines del Rey were developed on fragile ecosystems, which, in many cases, led to changes in ocean hydrology and beach erosion; loss of habitat; increased levels of air, water, and soil pollution; and degradation of local coral reefs. Houck's overview of environmental law in Cuba notes that as in other countries, the environment at critical moments is often sacrificed at the altar of development. He writes that Varadero is such a sacrifice zone: "The mangroves were cut, the dunes were leveled, the buildings sit cheek-by-jowl on the beach itself and their wastes are funneled away, not far, to sewage lagoons. Beach erosion has inevitably set in, and Cuba has begun Florida-style, offshore sand dredging to slow it down, trying to sustain the unsustainable" (2000, p. 42). As important as environmental protection is for tourism and the local population, Maal-Bared's analysis of environmental risk suggests on-going problems with environmental degradation are likely (2006; Bell, 2011).

Visitors in 2016 were concentrated in the capital, Havana, along the northeast coast, including Varadero, and further east to Cayo Coco. González and colleagues, discussing the development of the city of Varadero, write that as of 2010, almost 70 percent of tourist development was along northern coastal areas (2013, p. 217). Varadero, for example, a 20-kilometer Hicacos peninsula with 50 hotels and 20,200 rooms, receives tens of thousands of tourists each year (granma.cu, 2015; González et. al., 2013). The Varadero peninsula accounts for 44% of tourists and 55% of all rooms, generating 70% of all tourist revenue (Pérez-López & Díaz-Briquets, 2011; Becker, 2011, pp.143-144). Such concentration places a heavy burden on infrastructure, the environment, and local populations, suggesting a need to decentralize congested tourist visitations (Whittle, et al., 2003). Bishop's research concludes, "Small, resource-poor island states are compelled to develop a particular kind of tourism industry which is often externally-controlled, highly dependent upon external capital, and not particularly congruent with island society and ecology" (2010, p. 101; Dehoorne & Tătar, 2013). The impact of such development includes new infrastructure that must be constructed in support of the resorts: highways, water treatment, sewage treatment, and improvements and linking of local electrical needs to the national grid. Environmental costs include air and water pollution, beach or river dredging, land dispossession of local inhabitants, and habitat destruction, including coral reefs and mangrove swamps.

Despite the likely environmental consequences, recently announced plans to build up to eleven golf resorts include an agreement with the British firm Escencia Hotels to build a \$350 million resort to include a luxury hotel, 650 apartments, 200 homes, a shopping mall, tennis club, spa, yachting association, and an 18-hole golf course (havanatimes.org, 2013). The Varadero area will continue to experience increased tourist development. For example, according to Granma, the official voice of the Communist Party, Cuba began an electrical upgrade in 2013 for the tourist sector of Varadero at the cost of 85 billion Cuban pesos (granma.cu, 2015).<sup>10</sup>

The environmental costs associated with the expansion of Cuba's tourism industry have included the degradation of mangrove swamps and marine ecosystems and blocked water currents as a result of causeways built between the mainland and the islands of Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago (Maal-Bared, 2006, p. 355). Whittle and colleagues write that with expansion of

tourism, “New resort hotels and other tourist facilities, extensive networks of new roads, bridges, and environmental infrastructure (*e.g.*, storm water controls, sewage treatment, solid waste disposal, etc.) will be needed to avoid and minimize foreseeable adverse impacts to coastal air and water quality and natural resources such as mangroves, beaches, seagrass beds, and coral reefs” (2006). Recognizing the need for environmental protection as early as 1997, the government created the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment (CITMA) to help design and enforce policies to protect the environment (Whittle & Santos, 2006, pp. 78-79; Bell, 2011).

In the expansion of the tourism industry, there are also political and power elite interests to consider. There is, for example, significant military and elite Cuban influence over the importation of agricultural goods into Cuba. Despite policy to decentralize government control over the economy, Spoor and Thiemann write that there are vested economic interests in the import sector that have led to a dual segmented agricultural market. They explain, “Powerful parts of the Cuban elite profit much more from the controlled sales of imported goods with a high VAT<sup>11</sup> [than they do] from domestic production.... The state certainly directs much more effort and investment into the former system of food provision, while divesting from the latter, a policy which clearly contributes to keeping down national food production...” (2016, p. 9). Like state-owned enterprises, the military is also involved in other areas of the economy as well. Mora and Wiktorowicz’s analysis of the Cuban military’s business enterprises, such as the Industrial Military Union, illustrates the depth of military involvement in industry, tourist hotels, and agriculture (2003, p. 106).

Houck points out that various interests contest the primacy of development over the environment and that the Cuban government and its institutions such as CITMA struggle for economic development and at the same time environmental protection. Given its economic challenges, Houck concludes, “What may be surprising. . . is that the Cuban government would undertake such a journey in such severely difficult economic times. A large and experienced cadre of scientists in Cuba has been driving in this direction for decades, and it has caught the imagination of the Cuban leadership” (2000, p. 80). By the mid-1990s, “One could [already] speak of concrete projects and processes of organizational restructuring that offered the potential for a sustainable ecotourism in the future” (Winson, 2006, p. 14); however, as Feinberg and Newfarmer point out, while the government has recognized the significance of providing resource to expand tourism beyond Havana and vicinity, investment remains limited due in part to the high profit margins realized in the Havana region by vested interests (2016, p. 16). In this regard, the government is looking for \$8.2 billion in tourist sector investments for 326 projects to further attract foreign tourists throughout the island (Hamre, 2015).

The debate in Cuba today revolves around which sector the state and civil society should promote as a means to a more dynamic economy with more opportunity for those seeking a living beyond the state while retaining adherence to Revolutionary goals. Under Raul Castro’s leadership, a review and restructuring of the economy began and continues (Lavery, 2011; cubadebate.cu, 2016). Burbach writes in a recent issue of *NACLA* that there are three schools of thought over which direction is best for Cuba (2013). First, the statist position tends to reflect the existing state-controlled system but with emphasis on more efficient and effective operation by the state. As Lavery reports in his *21st Century Cuba* report, restructuring has included shifts in bureaucratic personnel as well as policy which may engender resistance to change. Lavery repeats Raul Castro’s comments that “bureaucratic resistance. . . will be useless. . . Without changing our mentality, we won’t be able to make the necessary changes” to the economy or productive organization (2011, p. 24; see also Peters, 2012, p. 22). In a speech to the 7th PCC

Congress, Castro once again reiterated the need for socio-economic change, saying, “Just as we aspire to greater efficiency and quality in state sector production and services, we also favor the success of non-state forms of management, on the basis, in all cases, of strict compliance with current legislation” (cubadebate.cu, 2016).

The second school includes those who view China as a model of a socialist market economy in which there is a substantial amount of free enterprise and privatization but under the guidance of a dominant state apparatus. China’s adoption of a market economy unleashed a considerable amount of private entrepreneurship and self-initiative. “Ceaseless growth may be irrational from a planetary perspective, but it is a functional requirement for the dominant economic structures that underlie our present world” and China’s, remarks Schweickart (2010, p. 6748). It is not growth per se that is important but what kind of growth. The Chinese model has serious implications for both socio-economic equality and environmental sustainability. It may unleash entrepreneurial energy, but it also unleashes investment speculation on the one hand and binge consumerism on the other, with increased air pollution and urban sprawl as a result. Neither case appears to be sustainable in the long run, nor does the Chinese system engender individual or community empowerment.<sup>12</sup> So does the socialist market model ultimately lead to a dead end? Schweickart apparently thinks so and advocates an alternative approach he terms “Economic Democracy,” which is somewhat similar in approach to Burbach’s third position.

Burbach refers to the third position as *autogestionario*, in which “democratic socialist values of participation, association, and solidarity should be at the heart of the workplace and the new economy” (2013, p. 11). Gold’s research among urban agriculturalists reflects this position (2014). How would *autogestionario* fit into an evolving eco/cultural tourist sector of the Cuban economy? One model to consider is the *Campesino-a-Campesino* (farmer to farmer or CAC) movement promoting agro-ecology in the Cuban agricultural sector under the auspices of ANAP, dedicated to the interest of small farmers (National Small Farmers Association of Cuba). ANAP advocates on behalf of cooperatives on credits, pricing, extension services and training (Sinclar & Thompson 2007). Based on their research, Rosset and colleagues believe that the promotion and improvement of organic and alternative farming is best accomplished among progressive farmer peers than through professional agronomists. They write, “A fundamental tenet of CAC is that farmers are more likely to believe and emulate a fellow farmer who is successfully using a given alternative on their own farm than they are to take the word of an agronomist of possibly urban extraction. This is even more the case when they can visit the farm of their peer and see the alternative functioning with their own eyes” (2011, p. 169).

The third perspective has the potential to fall under the general principles of sustainable community development. In this case, development is seen as a grassroots response in which communities are empowered to develop effective economic opportunity while at the same time considering quality of life issues such as equality, opportunity, and collective responsibility, all Revolutionary goals. Pérez Sáinz and Andrade-Eekhoff point out in their paper regarding local communities and their articulation with global markets that there is a need for a localized institutional structure to disseminate ideas, experiences, and resources within communities in a more equitable manner (2003). This is the potential of CAC among Cuba’s agro-ecology farmers. The promotion of agro-ecology farming by ANAP is *within* the farming community, reaching out to farms and cooperatives as common stakeholders in agriculture, remarked by the director of *Organopónico Vivero Alama* (personal communication, May 2013).

An organization is needed in the alternative tourist sector for several reasons. It can promote coalitions among various actors in ecotourism to improve access to resources across loca-

tions and regions. Secondly, an organization such as ANAP is needed for the eco- and cultural-tourism sector to promote these sectors to international tourists in an appropriate manner. The *Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos*, (The Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples, ICAP) is a government sponsored agency that functions to coordinate foreign visitations through education, cultural activities and work brigades. ICAP, however, does not operate as an informational clearinghouse within the local tourist sector, like the ANAP does for farmers. There is a need for a body to act as a coordinating mechanism with local and national governmental organizations. Such an organization would offer communication between independent *paladares* and *casas particulares* to share ideas and experiences. Such a process would increase dialogue with government for greater local empowerment that could lead to, as Pérez Sáinz and Andrade-Eekhoff phrase it, the “formulation of a hegemonic local development project” (2003). This third area, *autogestionario*, falls within the United Nations’ confines of sustainable development, in which three broad objectives are simultaneously achieved: “economic objectives (growth, equity, and efficiency), social objectives (empowerment, participation, social mobility, social cohesion, cultural identity, and institutional development), and ecological objectives (ecosystem integrity, carrying capacity, biodiversity, and protection of global commons)” (quoted in Vargas, 2000, p. 12). Vargas adds, “It is essential to explore development tools that affirm and support social cohesion while improving the quality of life and protecting its environment” (p. 21). This third perspective, in conjunction with the basic outline of community development, fits well within Raul Castro’s social vision and future economic policy proposals.

A focus on community as agent encourages a sense of empowerment among local inhabitants. Such empowerment involves the growth of “knowledge, confidence, power, skills, and access to knowledge,” which enables locals to effectively take charge of their communities (Pleño, 2006). Peters points out that such agency brings demands of inclusion in civil society and government dialogue. He writes, “Because of their new weight in the economy and their importance in its development, entrepreneurs, cooperatives, enterprises, and individual property owners have the potential to develop significant voices in policy debates” (2012, p. 23). Additionally, forms of localized community development offer the potential to either minimize the effects of or permit adaptation to outside events such as climate change, economic downturns, etc., much more easily than can capital intensive mega projects. Community participation in determining the community’s own future is critical for government policy implementation to be adaptable and successful. In general, such an approach would strengthen the narrative and meaning of the Revolution in the face of social change.

The idea of empowerment centers on the ability of communities to increase control over their lives, a significant goal of Cuba’s new economic policy. Empowerment necessarily involves renegotiating with the state to increase independence to take action aimed at social and political change. In other words, to the degree possible, communities should engage in self-organizing and power-sharing (in terms of opportunities, benefits, and decisions) with a minimum of state control, something yet to be realized in Cuba. In the case of ecotourism, this means the ability to determine the contours of how to meet the expectations of the tourist within a context of local cultural meaning. If the tourist experience with local residents is not made up of discrete moments and disjointed experiences—as distractions away from the resort—but rather takes place in a more “holistic” atmosphere of localism, then the tourist has the chance to understand the complexities of the meaning and relationship between nature and community. Such development transforms the community from being the “object” of tourism to the “owners” of the tourist experience. This understanding can be seen as a reification or affirmation of the

empowered community, with the added benefit of opening up new locally- controlled economic opportunity.

### **Conclusion: Community Development and the Future**

Moving forward with its economic plans and remaining committed to environmental protection, community-lead development of ecological and cultural tourism can play a greater and necessary role in meeting Cuba's future. The idea of a grassroots-state partnership for greater development of ecological and cultural tourism in areas such as coffee plantation production, *organoponicos*, urban gardens, and cultural heritage sites (such as at Matanzas) is based on the experiences of the Special Period.<sup>13</sup> The major obstacle for continuing this experience will depend on the state's willingness to give greater latitude of freedom to communities and organizations. But as Chaguaceda cautions, any partnership must be based on autonomous social movements that represent the authentic needs of civil society (2016). Raul Castro, recognizing the need to revamp the economy, has pushed, however haltingly, reform guidelines to encourage change and greater personal autonomy (Feinberg, 2011, p. 97; cubadebate.org, 2016).

Solidarity is significant for bringing together various clusters of community actors and institutions that offer the best means for an equitable distribution of economic opportunities and rewards. Considering the challenge to the state and civil society, Stricker summed up the experience, saying, "The Cuban experience demonstrates what people can accomplish in terms of social progress, given the political will and the power to do so" (2007, p. 196). With the push toward greater sustainability, both culturally and environmentally, decentralized ecological and cultural tourism are key to such efforts, in contrast to large projects such as those proposed for Varadero. Although the state is committed to large-scale tourist programs, Chaguaceda outlines forms of oppositional initiatives to state hegemony. She writes, "Within the autonomous initiatives that have taken hold beyond the reach of the government and the open opposition, we find valuable examples of new social movement activism" (2016, p. 189).

The Varadero project exemplifies a tension that exists between civil society and the state, between public and elite private spheres. The state is an important actor providing credit, technology, and training, but it is the community that should have the socio-cultural capital for final disposition in local development. Stem, et al., note, "Community self-determination and participation along with an emphasis on local, small-scale development is critical" (2003, p. 323). Gold's research with urban agriculturalists in Cuba illustrates the role of sustainability in people's perceptions of themselves. She quotes Karp, saying, "The meaning of a concept can shift the terms of discourse itself and create a very different picture of person and society than that implied in an earlier usage" (2014, p. 414).

A focus on community as agent encourages a sense of empowerment among local inhabitants. The idea of empowerment, a goal of sustainable communities, centers on the ability of communities to increase control over their lives, a process Cuba's government is slowly recognizing. Cuba faces a struggle common to many developing nations as they confront powerful forces that push capital-intensive projects versus more decentralized, community-controlled development. If the economic strategy is greater economic and social equality and a sensitivity to environmental sustainability, then community-based development is the appropriate means for achieving these outcomes.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of the revolution, environmental sensitivity has been a commitment influenced by the writing of José Martí, who believed a harmonious relationship with nature is an integral part of national liberation (Gold, 2014, p. 407). This commitment has continued. In 1999, the *Programa Nacional sobre la Diversidad Biológica* (NBSAP) (National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan), updated to include the 2011-2020 period, was instituted to develop programs for sustainable biodiversity and conservation (CBD, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The communal councils in Venezuela instituted under Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution were developed to institute such empowerment. These councils were designed to allow communities to "take over the direct administration of policies and projects that were created in response to the needs and aspirations of the communities, in the construction of a fair and just society" (Wilpert, 2007; see also Martinez, et al., 2010). The communal councils, to the extent possible, according to an interview with C. Martinez, employ local resources and labor to upgrade their community infrastructure. The responsibility to define, design, and implement community projects belongs to the community, in which all members fifteen years old and older have equal input into decisions (personal interview, July 2011). This system is meant to circumvent the rigid top-down management style of state bureaucracies and give communities a powerful stake in the development of their communities.

<sup>3</sup> Raul Castro, brother of Fidel, served as acting president beginning in 2006 and was officially made president in 2008, when an ailing Fidel Castro indicated he would no longer serve. Raul Castro has continued to stress the importance of Cuban economic self-sufficiency and sustainable development but with a greater emphasis on self-employment opportunities.

<sup>4</sup> This sense of opportunity presented itself one morning sitting in the small plaza in Viñales when a retired farmer sat down to visit and offered to sell some homemade cigars. He said that having tourists in Cuba, wishing to interact and meet Cubans gave him the opportunity to sell his cigars and supplement his retirement.

<sup>5</sup> *Jineteros* are individuals that offer themselves as guides to city sights, restaurants, and jazz clubs. They can be somewhat aggressive or insistent offering their services to tourists visiting Habana Vieja. Others are insistent on selling or performing a service for a fee (For an example of a *jinetero*, see Foley, 2005). I have met those who rudely insist on educating me on the realities of life in Cuba, while others have asked for clothes or money or tried to persuade me to buy their "authentic" Cohiba cigars.

<sup>6</sup> *Mogotes* are tall dome-like, rounded hills found in Pinar del Rio valley. Generally composed of limestone, the sides are steep and often with caves at the bottom. Many have animal species, such as colorful polymita snails, found nowhere else on earth. One cave offers boat rides into the hill, while a restaurant occupies another.

<sup>7</sup> The Helms-Burton Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1996, strengthened the U.S. embargo against Cuban economic and financial transactions.

<sup>8</sup> For example, sitting at a (government-owned) restaurant in the Plaza de Armas, a cartoonist told me that she made a good living from offering caricature drawings to patrons.

<sup>9</sup> The Special Period began with the collapse of Cuba's main trading partner, the Soviet Union. With a significant decline in both imports and exports, the country experienced a serious economic depression with rolling blackouts in major cities, a decline in agricultural output, lack of fuel, and chronic food shortages (personal interview with J. Garcia of Amistur, 2013; see also Deere, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> There is little governmental transparency about the environmental and social impact on the labor communities of Varadero and Santa Marta along the tourist strip of Varadero, Cuba. Research by González, et al. that focuses specifically on the development of Varadero as a tourist enclave and discusses urban planning of the city relative to tourism neglects to report on the social or cultural implications of such tourist development for the city population (2013).

<sup>11</sup> VAT is a value-added tax on goods and services, applied incrementally at each stage of production and point of sale.



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<sup>12</sup> The problems associated with Chinese development were discussed with faculty members during a visit to the Dalian Nationalities University, in China in 2013. The discussion centered on hyper-development in urban areas such as Dalian and Beijing.

<sup>13</sup> *Organoponicos* are urban agricultural cooperatives growing organic produce generally on raised beds of soil enriched with waste foods, animal manure, and crop residue. A well-known cooperative is UBPC Organopónico Vivero Alama, Havana's largest cooperative urban gardens complex, located in the Eastern municipality of Habana del Este.

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