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Thirty beehives on the edge of Fernando's agroecological farm will produce over three tons of honey in 2014

Farmer Autonomy With State Support: The Cuban Agroecological Experiment

*By Christina Bronsing-Lazalde**

The son of two pioneers of the Cuban agroecology movement, Fernando Funes-Monzote has been steeped in sustainable farming his entire life. Two years ago, he decided to take his knowledge to uncharted territories. He wanted to prove that diversified, agroecological farming can be sustainable not only on good soils, but can transform poor soils into productive land. In a country known for its top-down policies, Funes-Monzote is a testament to the bottom-up experimental nature of family farmers everywhere.

When Serápío, a 93-year-old farmer, was no longer able to work, he granted Fernando access to eight hectares of his land, located 40 minutes outside of Havana. Fernando deliberately chose to carry out his experiment on rocky, hilly lands with poor soils overrun by marabú—an invasive species of thorny bush that covers nearly 5 million acres across the island. After removing over 6,000 bushes by hand, Fernando and a small team began to measure the land, plot contours, build fences, dig a new well, and plan out the farm.

After only two years, Finca Marta—named after Fernando's mother—is buzzing... literally. From one beehive in the first year to thirty hives and over three tons of honey in 2013, Fernando now has a contract with the state to maintain 20-30 hives on the land. The government furnished the equipment for the hives and provides a guaranteed market for the honey.

Rows of lettuce, peas, spinach, herbs, sugarcane, coffee, cedars, bananas and yuca line the farm along with sheep, oxen and cows. The agroecosystem is vibrant, biologically diverse and highly productive. The farm supports six salaried workers and plans to pay off all the initial investments by the end of its fifth year. This success has come by way of much sacrifice and dedication from the whole family. Fernando's wife Claudia stays in Havana with their two boys during the school week and travels with them to the farm on weekends.

Fernando is not the only one eagerly pursuing an agricultural life in Cuba. The "Special Period"—following the fall of the Soviet Union and the country's loss of access to agrochemicals—initiated a new era of state support for sustainable agriculture and repopulation of the countryside. In recent years, new government

** Christina Bronsing-Lazalde is a community organizer, researcher and Food First Tour Coordinator. She co-led a Food Sovereignty Tour to Cuba this past January and will lead another trip in May 2014. For more information or to register to join the delegation, write to info@foodsovereignty tours.org or call (510) 654-4400, ext. 223.*

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CONTRIBUTORS

Corey Blant, Christina Bronsing-Lazalde,
Giorgio Cingolani, Ashley Pinkerton, Leah
Scrivener and Charles Wolinsky

INTERNS

Valentina De la Fuente, Chelsea Enwall,
Hayley Hedges, Lauren Heumann, Paula
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The Institute for Food and Development Policy - known as Food First - is a member-supported, nonprofit "peoples' think tank" and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and value-based solutions to hunger and poverty around the world, with a commitment to fighting racism and establishing food as a fundamental human right.



Christina and Fernando, January 2014

policies are bringing even more Cubans back to the land. In the past five years, over 184,000 people have been given land in usufruct,¹ which grants individuals and cooperatives the right to produce on otherwise idle land for a period of 10 years and 25 years, respectively.

It's no wonder the state is keen to support family farmers: these diversified farms are highly productive, even more so than centrally-planned, state-run cooperative farms. While small farms cultivate only about 25 percent of the land, they are responsible for more than 65 percent of domestic food production.²

The shift toward decentralization of land and decision-making continues to fuel local autonomy in Cuba, largely through the leadership and structure of the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP). Founded in the years following the 1959 revolution, ANAP is a powerful and well-organized force for agrarian reform. Through its many local chapters, the organization is the political voice of the peasantry, training leaders across the island—and around the world—in agroecology and farmer to farmer (campesino a campesino) knowledge exchange.

While Cuba still relies on food imports, small farms and cooperatives have made significant gains toward

food self-sufficiency and sovereignty.³ Unlike anywhere else, the Cuban state is an active partner in realizing these goals by creating policies that not only provide access to land for would-be farmers, but increasingly encourage local autonomy and decentralized decision-making. As we enter the International Year of Family Farming, we would do well to look to Cuba as a unique example of agrarian reform and state support for agroecological food production. But perhaps the greatest lesson Cuba teaches us is the need for state policies to evolve; to respond to farmers' needs; and to grant them the autonomy to experiment, thrive, and contribute to local and national food sovereignty.

New Law Envisions a Brighter Future for California's Urban Agriculture

By Ashley Pinkerton

Much of the US population lives far removed from the rural areas where most food is produced. But the expansion of urban agriculture in recent years has begun deepening awareness and broadening popular participation in the food system. Without a doubt, urban food producers have now become a dynamic—and even politically influential—pillar of the broader food justice movement. In California, the pull of urban farmers can be seen in a new law recently signed by Governor Jerry Brown. Assembly Bill 551, also known as the Agricultural Incentive Zones Act, offers major tax incentives to landowners who lease their plots to urban farmers.

In California, one of the greatest challenges to urban farmers is land tenure. The cost of land in the Golden State is on the rise, especially in cities like San Francisco where big tech companies and rent-control loopholes like the [Ellis Act](#) have caused property values to increase 22 percent over the last three years.⁴

With property values rising—making selling more attractive to landowners than leasing—leaseholders are not guaranteed the long-term agreements needed to properly develop land for lasting food production.

AB 551 promises to bolster urban agriculture by making land more accessible to urban farmers. For it to work, however, cities and counties must first “opt in,” after which landowners can enter into agreements with municipalities to develop small-scale agriculture in vacant, unimproved and otherwise blighted plots in exchange for significant property tax breaks.⁵ In some cases, urban land previously taxed at \$6,000 per year could drop to rates as low as \$600 according to one of the bill’s authors, Nicholas Reed.⁶

Reed and co-author Juan Carlos Cancino first began research for the bill in 2008. With collaboration from California State Assemblyman Phil Ting, the [San Francisco Urban Agriculture Alliance](#) and the [San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association](#) (SPUR), AB 551 passed unanimously in the Senate and by majority vote in the Assembly in 2013.

According to Reed, the inspiration for the law came from San Francisco’s [Little City Farm](#), where urban farmers Brooke Budner and Caitlyn Galloway turned an empty ¾ acre plot of land into a thriving urban farm that sells produce to local restaurants throughout the city. Despite their success, they were constantly worried about what would happen if the owner decided to sell the land.

AB 551 could change that. The law, however, is voluntary, so if it is to have an impact, the challenge is ensuring that cities and counties opt in. According to Reed, “People have to write their Supervisors,

Agriculture Commissioners, put pressure on local politicians. We have to get the word out and express interest. People have to raise their voices if we want to feel a real impact.”

Food First Welcomes Six New Board Members!

Food First’s commitment to grassroots social struggle and community-oriented solutions is due in no small measure to our Board of Directors. Food First board members are community-based activists and scholars who ensure that the organization’s work remains focused on the issues that matter most to people’s daily lives. We are pleased to introduce six newly elected board members, whose diverse skills, backgrounds and commitment to justice are a tremendous asset to the Food First team.

Gaye Adams Massey is an attorney and health advocate who served as Senior Deputy General Counsel for United Health Group from 2007 to 2013, overseeing legal teams advising on issues including privacy, technology and non-profit foundation legal issues.

Former Food First fellow **Brahm Ahmadi** is an Oakland-based social entrepreneur working to build healthier and more equitable inner city communities by creating change in the food system. He is the founder of People’s Grocery and the founder and CEO of People’s Community Market.

Pascal Bokar Thiam is a jazz guitarist and vocalist of Senegalese and French background. He teaches jazz and world music courses in at the University of San Francisco and the French American International School. He is also Chair of the Economic Development Committee, NAACP SF Branch

and owner of the award-winning Savanna Jazz Club.

Michael Dorsey is a recognized expert on global governance, finance and sustainability. Dr. Dorsey is the interim Director of the energy and environment program at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. In July 2010, the US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator appointed Dr. Dorsey to the EPA’s National Advisory Committee (NAC).

Devon Peña is a farmer, activist and Professor of Anthropology, Ethnic Studies and Environmental Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is also the founder and president of The Acequia Institute, dedicated to collaborative research and education for resilience and social justice in acequia farming communities of the Upper Rio Grande bioregion.

Malik Yakini is an activist, educator and founder of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, which operates a four-acre farm in Detroit. The DBCFSN spearheaded efforts to establish the Detroit Food Policy Council, which Yakini chairs.

NOTES

1. Juan José León Vega, Ministry of Agriculture, personal communication. Havana, Cuba. January 10, 2014.
2. Fernando Funes-Monzote. *Farming Like We’re Here to Stay: The Mixed Farming Alternative for Cuba*, 2008. <http://edepot.wur.nl/122038>
3. May Ling Chan and Eduardo Francisco Freyre Roach. *Unfinished Puzzle: Cuban Agriculture: the Challenges, Lessons and Opportunities*. Oakland: Food First Books, 2013.
4. Seligman, Katherine; “Evictions soar in San Francisco as real estate prices rise” The Sacramento Bee, Nov. 28, 2013. <http://www.sacbee.com/2013/11/28/5952916/evictions-soar-in-san-francisco.html>
5. Assembly Bill No. 551 text: Agriculture Incentive Zones; California Legislative Information. http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140AB551
6. Personal communication.

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