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Cubans: a Vulnerable Society?

The changes that have been taking place in Cuba in recent years, especially after its resumption of relations with the United States, have lead us to view this insular society as vulnerable. The opening of the economy and the growing importance of the private sector are creating social changes both positive and negative. This article seeks to identify the elements that are weakening Cuban society and making it vulnerable, as well as analyze the conditions that reinforce the stability on the Island. This article is the result of more than three years of research, thanks to the project *Quo Vadis Cuba? Implications for Europe and Poland* (2011-2013).

Key words: Cuba, vulnerability, society, social change, economic change

Vulnerability: a Brief Introduction

Vulnerability has many facets, depending on how and in what discipline it is analyzed. The meaning of this term has evolved significantly over the last three decades. At first, vulnerability was studied in reference to problems of epidemiology, food security, human-environmental interactions, and the capacity to respond to threats of natural disasters (Alwang, Siegel, and Steen 9-14). It also took into account economics, with a focus on the level of individual households. Over the years, however, its meaning has expanded considerably to include a range of elements and situations of “livelihood security” – i.e. exposure to risks, hazards, shocks and stress, as well as difficulty in coping with contingencies, that are linked to net assets (Moser 23). The concept of vulnerability therefore has different definitions and can be evaluated in different ways. Caroline Moser (23) offers a general definition of vulnerability: “Insecurity and sensitivity in the well-being of individuals, households and communities in the face of a changing environment, and implicit in this, their responsiveness and resilience to risks that they face during such negative changes. Environmental changes that threaten welfare can be ecological, economic, social and political, and they can take the form of sudden shocks, long-term trends, or seasonal cycles”. Even though this definition comes from an urban studies expert, I am convinced that it still remains very appropriate, as the majority of humanity is destined to live in cities, and Latin America has the highest rates of urbanization in the world.¹

¹ CEPAL – the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean brings us

It should be emphasized that vulnerability is not a static concept, as it implies dynamism and changes over time. Yet most studies so far have taken a quantitative approach. Kohlbacher concludes that this is because many researchers deem qualitative methods useful only in preliminary stages of research. Several studies, e.g. Dwyer et al., have tried to reinforce their arguments by including some form of qualitative analysis. In case of Latin America, however, there have been very few purely qualitative analyses. Among the few are those of Sanguinetti, Busso, and Katzman, the majority of which were developed at ECLAC (the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean). As a result, it is thought that quantitative methods do not paint a full picture for studying vulnerability in Latin America – social vulnerability² in particular. However, this picture is being filled in by the dynamic development of case studies in the area.

It is also necessary to emphasize that the opinions of those who are considered vulnerable are in many cases ignored. Indeed, researches often do not take into account the way vulnerable people perceive their own reality. In Europe and in other parts of the world, there is a recognized lack of understanding of the perspective of persons affected by vulnerability (Ac Bol, Suyapa Moncada Ruiz 8-15). Knowing the lifestyle and perspective of such persons with regard to their daily life is paramount to understanding their level of exposure to vulnerability, and to comprehending the impact that harmful events or abrupt changes have had on them. Such knowledge allows us to better understand the actions of vulnerable persons, and how these actions affect them and their environment.

Cuban Society: a Case Study

According to Hartley (332), “Case study research is a heterogeneous activity covering a range of research methods and techniques, a range of coverage (from single case study through carefully matched pairs up to multiple cases), varied levels of analysis (individuals, groups, organizations, organizational fields or social policies), and differing lengths and levels of involvement in organizational functioning”.

My interest in Cuban society and its future, in the context of its socio-economic transformation, has led me to analyze the country as a case study for my research. This was possible within the framework of the *¿Quo Vadis Cuba? Implications for Europe and Poland* project, which I have personally directed as a researcher from the Latin American Studies Center of the University of Warsaw (CESLA-UW). Since 2011, I have been conducting investigations on contemporary social and economic changes in Cuba. My observations have led me to conclude that in the case of Cuba, qualitative methods may be an appropriate instrument to for analyzing the perceptions and interpretations of Cuban people with respect to their daily-life and social vulnerability. According to Kohlbacher, the use of qualitative methods in case studies in the field of social sciences is suitable when we take an interdisciplinary approach and if we wish to obtain a holistic picture of the phenomena being studied.

a simple and shorter definition for vulnerability; namely, a “multidimensional process that occurs from the risk or probable risk of an individual, household or community of being hurt, harmed or subject to permanent changes from external or internal circumstances” (Busso 8).

² I.e. vulnerability to multiple stressors and shocks.

This article is dedicated to both, analyzing the vulnerability of Cuban society, and identifying the elements that can threaten its stability and cause damage. Among other things, this will help to predict and define the probability that it will experience negative changes to welfare. As we can see in Figure 1, the situation of the inhabitants of a given region is subject to the influence of a significant number of elements – both external and internal – as proposed by Ac Bol and Suyapa Moncada Ruiz. Given its history, international relations, geography, political and economic regime, institutions, and ideology, all of these factors play an important role for Cuba.

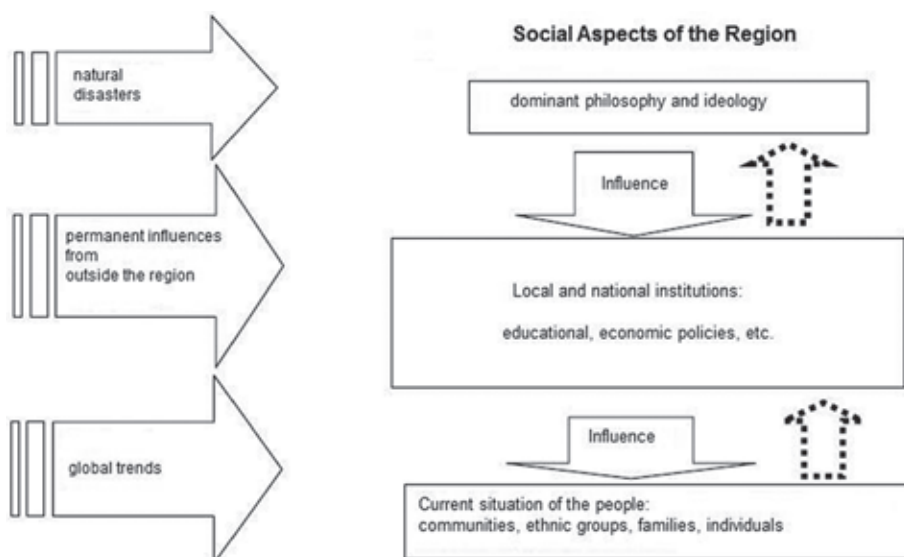


Figure 1: Dimensions of Influence in a Region, source: Ac Bol, Suyapa Moncada Ruiz 14.

To discuss the future of Cubans, it is essential to analyze their vulnerability and define the risks they face. Vulnerability begins with the notion of risk, and risk is characterized by the distribution of known and unknown probabilities of harmful events. These events are characterized by their magnitude (size and spread), frequency, duration, and history. Social, political, and economic actions may reduce the risk itself, or exposure to the risk.

Alwang, Siegel, and Steen (1) indicate that:

- The degree of vulnerability of a given household depends on the characteristics of the risks to which it is exposed, as well as its ability to respond there to.
- Vulnerability must be considered in terms of time, as households are exposed to risk over periods of time, and their responses to risk may change over time.
- The poor and near-poor tend to be vulnerable because of their limited access to assets (broadly defined), and limited abilities to respond to risk.

As we can see, an essential element of vulnerability is risk and its components. Recognition of multiple sources of risk in the case of Cuba will facilitate analysis of the vulnerability there in different contexts.

What are the risks that Cuban society is or may be facing? Excluding the obvious, i.e. natural disasters related to its geographical location, and considering the state of economic and political transformation on the island, the following should be listed:

- Deterioration of living conditions, as well as the marginalization and exclusion of individuals, households, and certain social groups.
- An increase in poverty.
- Deterioration of the natural environment surrounding households and individuals.
- An increase in organized crime and lack of security.

Certainly, the abovementioned risks can be analyzed using quantitative methods. However, in light of the above, the opinions of those actually at risk of vulnerability must also be considered. In 2012, during 3 weeks of field studies, I and my fellow colleagues, as part of a research team, conducted 60 in-depth interviews with Cubans. The material collected allowed us to identify different problems and bring them into focus. The interviewees indicated the following as a threat to their future:

- Crisis of values
- Polarization of society
- Collapse of the social order

In the following section, I will focus on those listed above, as well as issues related to migration and human capital.

The Polarization of Cuban Society and the Crisis of Values

Just like a crisis of values, the polarization of a society can pose a threat to the social order. The individualization and materialization of life, as effects of modernity (Bauman 2007), are greatly influencing the generational change that is now occurring in Cuba. They are also deepening the crisis of values that is being observed within this insular society – a phenomenon which is currently being discussed by different researchers and intellectuals.

The long term informative isolation of the island, its recent dynamic incorporation into the global market, its political rapprochement with the United States, and the international flow of migrants are all factors that are deepening social divisions. It is for these reasons that we decided to analyze the ongoing polarization and crisis of values that are destabilizing the social order. These two processes can be considered elements of threat and risk.

The variety of opinions on the current situation and future of Cuba, which we gathered through interviews conducted in March 2012,³ is a result of differences that stem from the individual household situations of the interviewees. We registered both very enthusiastic and optimistic views, as well as philosophical opinions full of anxiety and pessimism (Dembicz 106-108). The disparities stemmed primarily from the political affiliations of the respondents, their economic status, and individual experiences. Generally, members and supporters of the Cuban Communist Party, and activists from the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) – i.e. those responsible for decision-making at the local level – highlighted the achievements of

³ The complete results of the investigation were published in 2013 in the book *Cuba: ¿quovadis?*, edited by CESLA UW.

the Revolution and equal opportunity for all Cubans. They also indicated the mistakes thereof, stressing that much remained to be done. When speaking about the future of the island, which they related to revolutionary ideals, they were optimistic and tranquil.

In contrast, other interviewees, namely Cuban intellectuals, expressed feelings of failure, an unclear future, and the need to create a new political quality in the insular social space and recover lost values. These respondents not only represented the supporters of the island's political *status quo*, and were generally between thirty and sixty years of age. Although the individuals interviewed represented demographic and economic differences, they shared concerns about the crisis of values growing in Cuban society, which is moving towards individualism and consumerism.

The prevailing concern among the intellectuals interviewed was the future of young people and Cuban society in general. In their opinion, the inhabitants were not prepared for the consequences of economic changes, given that Cuba has heretofore been a welfare state that has guaranteed them work, a minimum salary, a low cost of living, and free public education and healthcare. They highlighted the deepening crisis of values, as the patterns of the revolution had no meaning to adolescents, who were more preoccupied with solving their own economic problems. They also pointed to growing social disparities on the island (as a consequence of current economic reforms), and stressed the need for a thorough review of the direction in which the country is headed. Their opinions were primarily divided along the ideological lines of socialism vs. capitalism, and in terms of preferred methods for creating a new social and economic order in Cuba. It should be underlined that none of the respondents denied the values of the revolution or its key achievements (e.g. free access to healthcare, education, social equality, and security).

Apart from varying degrees of optimism and pessimism, we also noticed discrepancies regarding visions of Cuba's future. According to some respondents, the island should continue on its socialist revolutionary path; while according to others, it should look for new directions of development. For some, the pace of the changes was too fast; for others, it was too slow.

These differences are even more pronounced if we consider the age structure of Cuban society. 20% of the Cuban population is over 60 years of age, and still fully economically active. This demographic represents more traditional attitudes than those shared by young people (Cuba is approaching the model of Generation Y). Some members of the Communist Party, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) defend the existing system, and are likely to be confronted in political debates by the supporters of changes. The majority of young people were eager to see a freeing up of the economy and more social mobility. For them, the slogans of socialist revolution are of little or no value.

The Social Order

The aforementioned findings indicate increasing divisions within Cuban society that are part of a much wider range of conditions (such as increasing poverty, marginalization, and criminality), and that may provoke social disorder. According to

Jonathan Turner (197), social life is an ongoing confrontation of forces that seek to maintain social order with the forces that cause disturbances and changes. Neither force can be identified as good or bad, or positive or negative. This struggle is endless and inspires sociologists to attempt to answer the question of how and to what extent order can be maintained in a society. The growing threat of a collapse of the social order in Cuba considerably increases the vulnerability of its society. In the following part, we shall discuss the eventualities of this scenario.

Conflicts and changes often contribute to unfavorable life conditions. Still, however, there must be a way for people to coexist peacefully and harmoniously within a society. Otherwise, social space would fall apart or become an area of continuous conflict. Problems of social order are therefore directly related to social control, which can cause major problems in large, complex, and stratified societies.

Jonathan Turner, in his approach to this matter, analyzed three variables: the size of the society, and the social differences and inequalities. Analysis of Cuba according to this formula indicates that it is far from social disorder (this will later be presented briefly). Turner (198) indicates that the size of the population is important in maintaining social order. Human interactions, in terms of emotions and trust, are much easier in small societies. Direct ties and solidarity strengthen social control. Likewise, a lack thereof weakens it. The fact that Cuba – an insular state – has a population of 11 million inhabitants, an aging society with negative population growth, and high emigration rates contributes to the upkeep of its internal order. Solidarity and emotional ties within Cuban society are strengthened by the existence of several political and social organizations. The universality of belonging to the Cuban Communist Party, the massive membership of children and youth in the Cuban Pioneers Organization, the vast network of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) – which control citizen activism at the local level – and the intense activity of the Federation of Cuban Women have all deeply penetrated Cuba's insular society and helped maintain stability therein.

Military forces control approximately 50% of the Cuban economy and major state enterprises, despite the fact that there are less than 60,000 servicemen enlisted in the army (Moloeznik 160). Also, members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution exercise considerable control over society. The organization is hierarchical, pyramidal, and centralized, and includes entities at different levels of society and the national administration. It is currently organized on neighborhood areas, and municipal, provincial, national level, and holds meetings at its 133,000 centers, bringing together nearly eight million people over 14 years of age. It was built on the idea of creating an efficient society that would be willing to remove any kind of counterrevolutionary movement. The same kind of social self-control was also developed by other organizations in Cuba, such as the Union of Young Communists (*Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*), and the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC – *Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba*). Today, however, there are other organizations that offer alternative social networks to those offered by officially accepted institutions. These include Masonic lodges, Christian churches (Baptist, Pentecostal), and others, and political and cultural organizations not legalized by the government (UNPACU – *Unión Patriótica de Cuba*, Estado de Sats for example).

According to Turner, the second and third elements hindering maintenance of the social order are the increasing stratification and social differences occurring in

cultural space, professional roles, economic activities, family structures, and other numerous aspects of life. In recent years, Cuban society has been experiencing dynamic changes in these areas, which may end up causing disturbances. The increasing importance of the private economic sector, in which profits are much higher than those in the state sector, is creating visible social and spatial disparities. This is where the consequences of the transformation in Cuba, a society accustomed to welfare, pose a threat to the stability of the social order. Currently, the Cuban regime has effective control structures that are supported by the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR – *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*) and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. But the strength of these institutions will most likely diminish in the years to come as a result of the generational, social, and economic changes that Cuba is experiencing.

The consequences of the social change are not all negative. Today, although still rather insignificant, the LGBT movement, workers' associations and unions (carriers, taxi drivers, etc.), organizations for human and civil rights linked to the Cuban opposition, independent bloggers, and other activists are making themselves increasingly visible in Cuba.

Final Considerations

One more very important aspect should be mentioned in order to complete this analysis of vulnerability in Cuban society in the context of the current economic and political changes: the happiness. In 2011, a resolution from the UN General Assembly⁴ invited member countries to measure the level of happiness of their people, and to use the results to help guide their public policies.⁵ According to Bruno S. Frey and Alois Stutzer (402), nowadays, it is essential to research happiness when formulating economic policies (be they on the micro or macro scale). The information helps countries to understand and anticipate the social consequences of changes in their levels of unemployment and inflation, provides an insight as to the quality and conditions of governance, indicates levels of social capital, and simply diagnoses individual well-being. An analysis which covered 49 countries in the 1980s and 1990s suggested that among factors important to feelings of well-being are improved accountability, effectiveness and stability of government, rule of law, and control of corruption.

Unfortunately, despite the expansion of research on happiness, which has been conducted in most countries around the world, Cuba has not yet been the subject of such study.⁶ This is due to lack of social research, including measurements of the level of happiness among the inhabitants of the island. However, taking into account the WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT 2013, that presents a general picture of the Latin American region, Cuba should be among countries with higher levels of happiness.

⁴ It is resolution 65/309 of 19 July 2011 entitled "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development".

⁵ Cuba is one of the most active countries in this Community.

⁶ For more information, refer to the World Happiness Report 2015 <http://worldhappiness.report/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/04/WHR15.pdf>

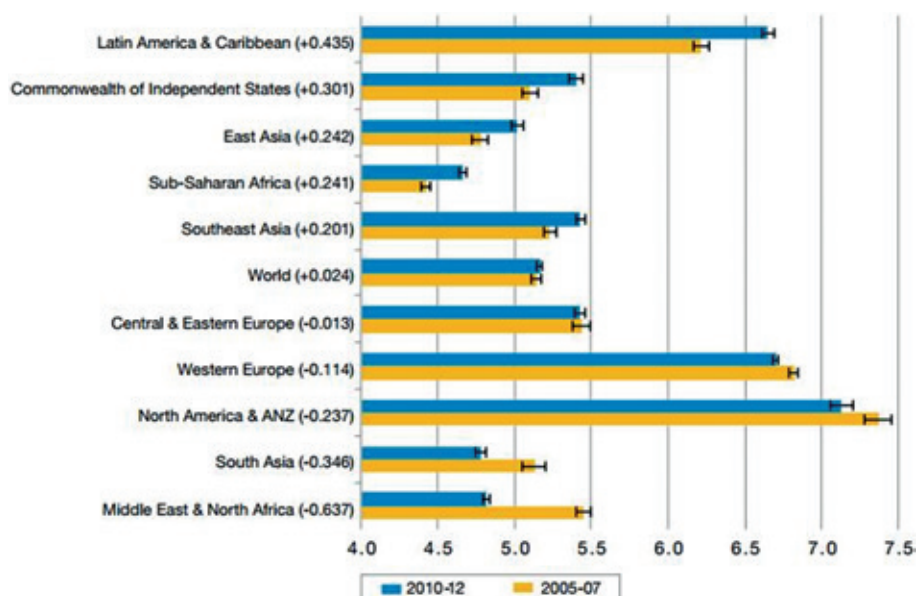


Figure 2: Comparing World and Regional Happiness Levels: 2005-07 and 2010-12, source: Helliwell, John, Layard, Richard and Jeffrey Sachs 25.

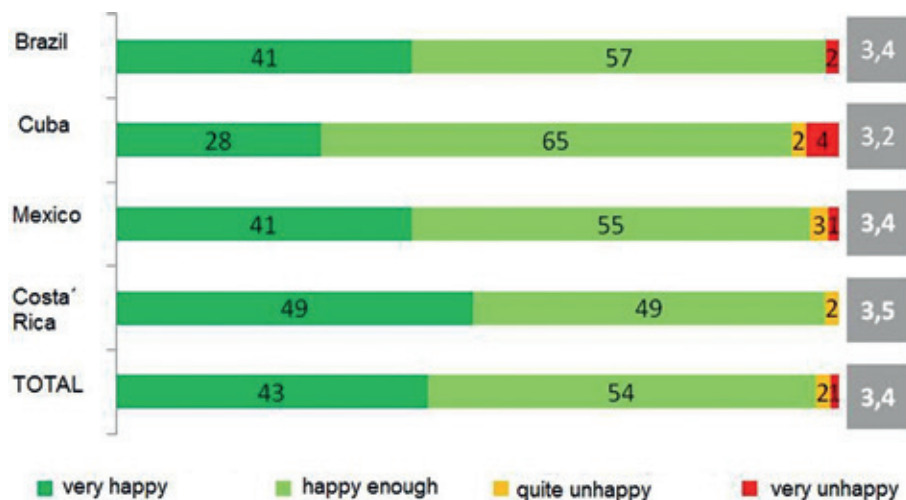


Figure 3: The level of happiness of Latin American university students (in%), source: own elaboration.

This lack of information prompted us to conduct a small poll on the happiness of Cubans as part of our socio-economic research in Cuba in 2012. We interviewed 50 university students from the University of Havana. In order to compare the results, we conducted a similar survey at the universities of Mexico (130 respondents), Brazil (90 respondents), and Costa Rica (180 respondents). The results obtained are in line with the assertions in literature, and the students participating in the survey

generally perceived themselves as happy people. Despite the limited number of respondents, we noted that their financial capacity, as well as their housing situation, affected their sense of happiness. The average level of happiness among the entire group, on a scale of 1 to 4, was 3.4.

The Costa Ricans had the highest self-proclaimed levels of happiness. This corresponds to the results of international surveys conducted by institutions associated with the United Nations.⁷ Despite the fact that the feeling of happiness among respondents was generally very high, the group that considered themselves the most unhappy were the Cuban students. 6% of them declared themselves to be unhappy and very unhappy. This can be attributed to their level of income, lack of savings, and housing situation. The statements from Cuban students indicated that they have the worst economic and housing situation as compared to the other groups.

Cuba's inclusion in the globalized world will create major social challenges. Moreover, the economic and social transformation it is experiencing today will undoubtedly result in great structural and institutional changes. According to researchers specializing in Cuba,⁸ its insular society will suffer from increasing economic and spatial disparities. Disadvantaged territories and social groups – a phenomenon that the Cuban revolution tried to eliminate for more than 50 years – have become visible.

For these reasons, it is very important to observe and analyze the variables and elements that endanger Cuban society by making it vulnerable. The scope of these factors is much wider than what is presented in this article, which focuses only on the qualitative side of social vulnerability. The aim of further research will be to allow Cuba to avoid the mistakes made by Central European countries as a result of a transformation processes.

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⁷ Compare with the *World Happiness Report 2013*, unsdsn.org

⁸ See the works of Rafael Rojas, Omar Everleny Perez, or Luisa Iñiguez Rojas.

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