



‘Switched-Off’ from Globalisation: Cuba – A Case Study

Cuba is a nation state and the largest of the islands in the Caribbean Sea, situated just 90 miles from Florida, USA. It has been ruled by the Communist dictatorship of Fidel and then Raul Castro since the Cuban Revolution in 1958.

Figure 1 Map of Cuba



The Influence of Physical Geography

The country is located in tropical latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere, (Figure 1) close to a destructive plate boundary (North American and Caribbean Plates). Consequently, the country can be classed as being a multi-hazard zone as it is also in the Caribbean hurricane belt. Surrounded by the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea, it has high levels of annual rainfall (1000–2000mm) which combined with its mixed geology, mountainous topography and widespread occurrence of limestone, makes the landscape prone to experience landslides and rapid erosion. At the same time, there are benefits of Cuba’s global position; the tropical climate and fertile volcanic soils give rise to a range of ecosystems and high-quality agricultural land. The erosion of limestone has created dramatic Karst scenery and mountain landscapes and contributes to the turquoise waters and white powder sand beaches on the north coast at Varadero and Cayo Coco. Cuba also has some of the most pristine coral reefs and beaches in the world thanks to limitations imposed on travel to the island by the communist government. It has used these natural

advantages to develop a tourist industry which, while relatively modest in scale, has the potential for further development.

Geo-Politics and the Cuban Revolution

Cuba has desirable agricultural land and coastal sites for industrial development. The island is in a strategic position as it has a long coastline and lies at the ‘entrance’ to the Gulf of Mexico. It is also close to the USA, currently the world’s leading superpower. During the first half of the 20th century, Cuba was controlled by a right-wing dictator who sold off much of the country’s industries, agricultural land (particularly sugar cane plantations) and tourist resorts to US companies and investors. These early agricultural TNCs paid and treated workers poorly. The country experienced economic leakages and the government was also corrupt, not reinvesting profits from foreign firms into social development. A left wing, Communist revolution, led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, occurred between 1953 and 1958, and in January 1959, they overthrew the government after a protracted guerrilla war.

The influence of Communism and Socialism in Cuba and the rest of the world in the latter 20th century

The 1960s saw a ‘Cold War’ between the bipolar superpowers of the USA (Capitalist Politics) and the USSR (Communist Politics). The space race between them was particularly important, not only in showing the world who was the most advanced and powerful country, but also in developing nuclear, long range missiles. Due to both its politics, and investment and financial support from the USSR, Cuba became an ally of the USSR. During 1962, the USA discovered USSR nuclear weapons on Cuba. It ordered a naval blockade on Cuba and threatened war, as did the USSR in retaliation. This pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war until both sides backed down. The USA then decided to place a trade embargo on Cuba and no country that considered itself an ally of America could trade with Cuba. Any country doing so (such as other Communist nations) was not able to trade with the USA and their trading partners.

In the late 20th century, Communism started to collapse, culminating in the fall of Communist governments across the traditional party stronghold of USSR and a number of Eastern European countries. These communist countries had been key to enabling Cuba to have some level of financial support during the 1960s-80s. As crop failures occurred in west-central USSR (now Ukraine) and overspending on the military and the space race had an impact on the USSR’s economy, other countries they supported, such as Cuba, lost their financial support, food supply and a vital trading partner. Eventually, the disgruntled public

across Eastern Europe and some states in the USSR, peacefully rebelled against Communist rule. The system collapsed in a domino effect across those nations after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, reunifying East and West Germany and destroying the divide between left and right, known as the Iron Curtain.

The break-up of the USSR into 14 separate countries (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan to name some of the larger territories), with many pursuing capitalist futures meant no support for Communist Cuba. This heightened the effect of the US trade embargo leaving Cuba very much alone.

Figure 2 Poorly maintained buildings and fading pastel coloured facades in Havana, and a renovated 1950's American car



Figure 3 The presidential Neo-classical building in constant disrepair, fronted by colourful 1950s American Cadillacs



The effect of the US trade embargo on Cuba, leading to the country being increasingly switched off from globalisation

Being 'switched off' from an increasingly globalised world means a country may have physical geographical constraints that reduce its connectivity. Cuba is well located yet is switched off in a number of cultural and economic ways. A government may pursue an isolationist policy (reducing contact with other cultures and political systems). Cuba has done this by severing ties with some western powers such as the USA as well as monitoring and limiting internet use and social media access. Reduced connectivity and mobile phone contact lessen a country's Globalisation Index score. A country may also be 'switched off'

by not trading with a range of countries, nor entering into trade bloc agreements. Cuba could well have been incorporated into NAFTA given its proximity to Mexico and Cuba and friendlier ties with Canada. However, its relationship with the USA prevents this.

Specifically, Cuba has been affected in the following ways:

- The trade embargo reduced the number of Cuba's trading partners. Countries tied politically and economically to the USA and its allies would lose a powerful alliance should they defy the embargo. Any countries that continued economic or political ties with Cuba were seen, in the eyes of the USA government, as endorsing Communism and going against the democratic values of the west and capitalist politics of America.
- Countries that did trade with Cuba were largely Communist states, particularly the USSR and later China, both of whom provided resources to the country. However, the collapse of Communism in USSR in 1989 and a decade of famine and recession before that reduced the support Cuba received from this ally, and the increasing difference in Communist ideology between China and Cuba reduced support from the East Asia.
- The lack of trade partners had multiple effects. The overwhelmingly negative effect was to reduce access to natural resources and a wider range of food commodities. During the 1980s and early 1990s, once the support of other Communist nations declined, food shortages were regular, and rationing needed to be enforced.
- New and updated technologies were not easily imported and, with a reduced GDP due to limited exports, importing technology proved more difficult. As a result, the population had limited access to improved methods of transportation and access to mobile and internet connections. A lack of disposable GDP resulted in low levels of investment in housing and infrastructural improvements. Cuba's socialist politics meant that a large percentage of GDP was committed to education and free healthcare, which proved successful, with some of the highest literacy rates and life expectancies across the Americas (in 2012 Cuban literacy was at 99%, above the USA and life expectancy stood at 79, one year more than the USA). Conversely, the amount of GDP committed to these aspects of social welfare, combined with the effects of the trade embargo left the government with little to invest in transport systems and housing. Consequently, it is still difficult for many Cubans to travel widely to access potential employment, and many live in poor standard housing, without running water and with intermittent electricity supplies, even in Havana.
- Poorly maintained housing and business properties are ubiquitous across Cuban cities. However, the age and range of architecture, along with the faded (often pastel) colours and eroded facades due to the lack of investment in maintenance has given a number of cities a unique character. In Havana (see **Figures 2** and **3**) the architectural landscape is largely made up of Spanish colonial Neo-Classical (modernised versions of Greek and Roman buildings) and Baroque buildings from 1750–1850, along with Art-Deco styles showing the influence of American architectural trends during the early 20th century when Cuba was allied to the USA. In Cienfuegos, which was a major French trading post when French and Spanish colonists ruled the country, the styles are French Neo-Classical. The buildings in these cities were not removed and replaced by Communist Brutalist architecture as in parts of Europe, but neither were they maintained.

Consequently, Havana, Cienfuegos and other urban centres are uniquely Cuban in their look; Instagrammable, crumbling, historic mosaics of faded pastel colours that have created a particular place identity. Havana and Trinidad both enjoy World Heritage Status (cultural) as a result of their architecture.

- The lack of imported transport technology meant that the population had to rely largely on vehicles imported from the USA before the revolution, such as 1950's Chevrolets and the General Motors Cadillac (see **Figure 2**). Over time commuters and taxi drivers alike have added spare parts from other vehicles to ensure their mode of transport remains in working condition, if not road worthy. Although unsafe, these cars are now an iconic image of Cuba due to their bright colours and retro-vintage status. They create some of the most popular Instagram images for today's travellers, ensuring a unique characteristic for this country.
- Many of these situations seem problematic. However, urban Cuba has gained a unique visual identity because it is, in a sense, preserved in time. As a result, this has made the country attractive to tourists.
- The natural environment was also well preserved for many decades after the Cuban revolution. The lack of connections with countries whose populations had the disposable income to travel meant that a range of ecosystems have been until recently very well preserved. The Isle of Juvetud (**Figure 1**), and beaches of Varadero and the Cocos archipelago have well preserved coral reefs, teeming with wildlife, and unspoilt, white sand beaches. The Bay of Pigs (named after a failed invasion there by the US army) is a huge wetland swamp and mangrove system (a wetland forest with trees that are highly adapted to saltwater conditions), untouched by tourism and development. It is still well protected and caiman alligators thrive there. Cuba has a diverse bird population with some endemics. Hummingbirds, vultures, parrots and other exotic species are common. This is largely due to the protection of forested areas and re-use of agricultural land which has reduced deforestation.
- During the 1980s, Castro's government realised that the combined attractions of a pristine environment, crumbling, photogenic urban landscapes and an interesting political history (made all the more intriguing by the iconic image of 'Che' Guevara – **Figure 4**) could provide the country with a potential income from tourists. It opened up borders to foreign tourists from some developed nations, including Canada, but not US citizens.

Figure 4 The often exploited images of Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevara



The image is displayed as a national icon on a parliamentary building. With globalisation, this image has been increasingly used to market t-shirts and posters to younger members of western society.

The Impact of becoming more connected over the coming decades.

'The world was getting smaller it seemed. Resultantly, it felt like to me, that everywhere was getting to be a little more like everywhere else. Everywhere that is, apart from Havana, Cuba'.

This excerpt from 'Cuba' by Stephen Smith suggests a place that had not, during the 2000s, been homogenised by global culture in an increasingly connected world.

- The thawing of US-Cuba relations during 2014–2017 provided hope that the embargo would end. US president Barack Obama and Cuban ruler Raul Castro entered into negotiations to remove the embargo and encourage tourism between the countries. In August 2017, the first cruise ship brought passengers from Miami, Florida to Havana. However, Donald Trump replaced Obama as US President in 2018 and reversed these decisions. Relations are frosty once more.
- This may change with a change in politics likely in both countries in the coming years. During the 2000s and 2010s tourism has been increasingly embraced by Cuba and consequently developments to accommodate tourists are emerging in Varadero, Cayo Coco and in southern resorts such as updated and expanding hotel complexes and all-inclusive resorts with full facilities such as golf courses.
- Increasingly tourists are demanding access to the wetlands, coral reefs and beaches. This threatens the diversity created by being 'switched off' from tourism. There have recently been reports of high levels of plastic pollution, littering and fuel pollution in Cienfuegos Bay, near to the tourist hotspots of Cienfuegos and Trinidad. There is the ever-present issue of nutrients in sun-tan lotions washing off beaches into the Caribbean waters and potentially creating algal blooms atop of the coral reefs that are prominent around the island. This can block out light and cause the coral, an important breeding ground for many marine creatures, to die.
- The rise in power and production of new technologies in a number of Asian countries, particularly China, has meant that these countries are powerful enough to ignore threats imposed by America. Consequently, Cuba has now introduced mobile technology and Wi-Fi hotspots into its key cities. In Havana, people need to find a Wi-Fi hotspot to connect to the internet. The government screens the content and social media that people use, though doesn't entirely block connections with the western world.
- One of the main exports to many developing countries has been medical, with doctors to help with development, as in Venezuela.
- The increased connectivity with the west via social media means that younger generations are demanding western products, material goods, music and sports. Manchester United FC and Barcelona are now the most popular football teams in Cuba. US Hip-Hop is increasingly heard in Havana with artists like Kanye West very popular. In 2016 demand for western live music led to the government allowing the Rolling Stones to play the first ever gig in Cuba by a foreign band since the Revolution.

- Such western influences are desired by young Cubans. What may happen in future is a change in musical and artistic direction from salsa and ballet to rock, pop and hip-hop. Popular sports like baseball (an American import from before the revolution) may be replaced by soccer. Coca Cola is already the most popular soft drink in the country, and one would assume that other imports will follow, and that food and drink culture will be increasingly homogenised.
- The influx of tourists over time make it likely that buildings and transportation will be upgraded to accommodate the wealthier tourist. Catering more for the young, Instagram obsessed, budget traveller may be a better way of preserving the iconic look of these crumbling cities. The wealthy, tourists demanding 'creature comforts' will eventually see the cities of Cuba change. Will these improvements trickle down to the poorer urban communities? Often the few high-end hotels in the city are the last places to lose electricity during a grid failure. This suggests that while visitors will be looked after and tourism workers may benefit, the poorest may continue to suffer.

Cuba is still largely 'switched off' in contrast to its Caribbean neighbours but is becoming increasingly connected over time via tourism and the internet. It remains to be seen if it can retain its unique cultural and its built and natural characteristics with the onslaught of globalisation.

Key Words:

Switched Off – When a location is lacking global connectivity, due to reduced trade, technological, political links.

Globalisation Index – a method of measuring and presenting how connected a country is.

Communism – a type of politics that is often used by oppressive governments, that also aims to spread wealth equally across a population, not allowing for individual gain and provide elements of social welfare.

Capitalism – a type of economic politics pursued in the democratic world, but increasingly in oppressive countries such as China and Russia. Individuals can be entrepreneurial and there is freedom for people to earn based on their skills. Often creates large divides in wealth

Questions

- 1) Explain why Cuba is considered as being switched off from globalisation. (8 marks)
 - Use a range of reasons.
 - Refer to examples and specific detail.
- 2) Assess the impacts of being switched off from globalisation. (12 marks)
 - Use a range of impacts, both positive and negative as well as socio-economic and environmental.
 - Refer to examples and specific detail.
 - Make an overall assessment as to what is / are the effects.
- 3) Evaluate the impacts of increased connectivity brought about by globalisation on the environment and people. (20 marks)
 - Use Cuba as a template for your answer but you can include any other examples you have studied. In Cuba with strong centralised governance the answer may be different compared to other examples chosen.
 - In an evaluation question you have to look at both sides of the question; exploring good things and the bad things across both environment and people. You do need to come to an evidenced conclusion based on your range of arguments.
 - For environment you can look at destruction by human activities such as resource exploitation and tourism, as well as making the point that some MNCs invest millions in sustainable development and conservation programmes.
 - For people you can assess the importance of economic development and possible multiplier effects and benefits of internet mobiles, etc. as well as looking at the downside of socio-cultural contamination, etc.
 - The conclusion may depend on the strength of connectivity and how it is managed.

Further Viewing/Listening

- Che: Part 1: YouTube
- The Buena Vista Social Club.

Further Reading and Research

- Smith, S. (2005). 'Cuba – The Land of Miracles'. Abacus Press.

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