

## Cuba anecdote

Ludi Simpson

after a short visit to Cuba (his eighth over 23 years) in February 1993

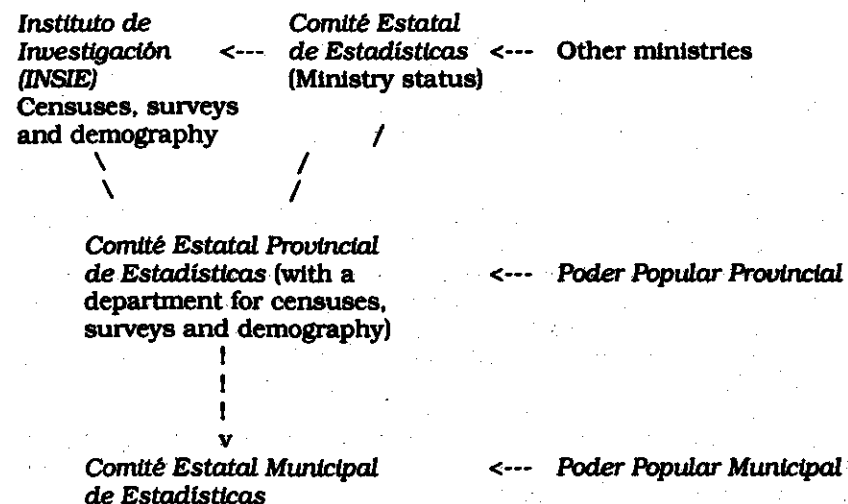
Walking down Avenida 52 towards Prado, a street sign stands out on the other side of the road: *Comité Estatal de Estadísticas, Oficina Provincial de Cienfuegos*. The local statisticians. After 20 minutes my family drag me away, having arranged to return later that day. We continue on to Prado and round into Avenida 54. This is the main shopping street of Cienfuegos, one of Cuba's industrial cities on the south coast. The city name has no interesting connection with one hundred fires. A developer proposed a new town with this North-American style street system in 1839, to serve the emerging sugar cane area. He gained permission for his plan from the Spanish governor of Cuba of the time, whose name was ... Señor Cienfuegos.

It is hot and mid-day. There is not a lot in the many shops that we pass, and only a few of them are busy. There is dire scarcity throughout Cuba, following the breaking of favourable trading agreements by socialist Europe and the Soviet Union. Almost all food and goods are limited to *la libreta*, the ration book that entitles one, as long as supplies last, to clothes on a specific day of the month, industrial household goods on another, and a very limited weekly diet at home. Books and icecreams are the only obvious items *a la libre*. The informal market occupies an increasing number of hours of family life, to get soap or milk or a little meat, from those who have or farm extra. The black market in imported goods and dollars is rather different; for this, tourists are a natural attraction for those willing to engage in it.

The atmosphere is relaxed, very sunny, and very friendly.

### The structure of Cuban statistical institutions

Cienfuegos is the smallest of Cuba's provinces, with a population of 376,000 similar to the size of Bradford or Newcastle. Armando Medina Hill is in charge of censuses and surveys. He sits me down in his office and smokes on a pipe. He was 20 at the time of the Cuban 1959 Revolution and was then involved in political action, "not much, just the same as everyone else". He tells me how his office receives work both from the national statistical office and from the municipal and provincial local government structures of *Poder Popular*. Structurally it looks like this:



In practice the municipal statistics offices function mainly to collect economic and social data from production and service outlets. They do not generate their own survey and investigative work.

### Current work

Armando takes out his programme of work, handwritten, and talks me through both the work and the reasons for it.

#### Demographic estimates

The office produces data from birth and death registration and from administration of the national identity card, which are used to update population estimates. The population of Cuba is growing, and particularly in the urban areas: the city of Habana had 2.2m of Cuba's 10.9m inhabitants in 1992 (the effect of Cuba's development policies on population change, compared to other Caribbean countries, is a topic I once unsuccessfully attempted to research).

Armando has calculated the regional infant mortality rates: 10.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births for Cuba as a whole is an achievement that has been rightly lauded internationally. It is one reason for Cuba's high life expectancy, that equals the achievement of developed countries. The infant mortality rate for Cienfuegos was 8.0; for the other fifteen provinces it ranged from 6.6 (Villa

Clara) to 12.9 (Isla de la Juventud).

The national net migration out of Cuba was 5,309 in 1992. Armando felt that this represents a low loss of Cuban citizens given the difficulties all citizens face.

#### *Census of equipment*

A census of equipment in those workplaces that are idle or on short-time working because of the oil shortage. The trading agreements with the ex-socialist countries often involved barter, for example oil for sugar; the arrangement was favourable to Cuba only in the sense that it maintained a constant exchange rate, while third world goods on the open market tend to reduce in price compared to first world goods. Forced now to trade on the open unfair markets, Cuba is at present only able to afford 6m tonnes of oil compared to the 13m tonnes it consumed annually in the eighties. Some workplaces are paralysed, with workers continuing on full pay but without work. This census aimed to quantify the problems of maintaining machinery in fair condition until it can be used again.

#### *Census of offices*

Many of the large houses of the wealthy who fled Cuba in 1959 and 1960 were occupied as office bases for new social and educational programmes. The survey was of all state enterprises - most enterprises - to assess which offices are under-occupied or could be reorganised to release buildings for residential housing. By 1972 Cuba had eliminated the last of its shanty towns; it has innovative developments of housing built by workers on sabbatical for themselves or others at their workplace. There is always a need for new and improved housing.

#### *The informal market*

A survey of prices for household consumables and food sold informally outside of the *libreta* shops. The Cuban government at all levels seems to believe that an informal market is inevitable given the shortages. There are second hand shops for all sorts of manufactured goods, but to sell food and new goods outside the *libreta* system is in fact illegal. This illegality has always been accepted as the quid pro quo for guaranteed work and a guaranteed distribution of goods to all, a distribution that in general has increased in quantity and variety over the years, up to the end of the 1980s. In this new situation, the regional statistics office monitors prices simply by its staff recording prices of standard goods that were circulating out of the shops. It would be difficult to construct a more open official investigation.

Armando gave the example of milk. In the shops it is only available for children under 2 years old, at 0.25 pesos for a litre. From some farmers or

individuals with cows, milk can be bought for 2 pesos a litre. Some of it then appears on the streets in Cienfuegos for 10 pesos a litre.

"Is selling on the informal market a crime? Well it is, but some sorts of this crime are worse than others - the important thing is not that something is being sold but where it has come from. The worst is when a worker steals form a workplace to then sell on the street. You know, the informal market will only be eliminated when the state can provide for all."

#### *Study of people's official transactions*

*Tramités* are all those visits to the bank, the post office, to offices to deal with changes to the identity card or vehicle registration, and so on. The study found what was considered as a high proportion of people making visits outside their home town for ordinary transactions, wasteful of energy and time. Up to fifteen separate transactions had to be made when someone changed their living address. There was now a mood to decentralise offices.

#### *Census of allotments*

To assess the extent to which workplaces could provide food from their own resources.

#### *Quality of economic reporting*

A national sample survey commissioned by the government Finance Office.

#### *Animal-drawn transport*

A provincial census of licensed carriage of people and goods, and of services to this industry. These are mainly private family concerns and are seen as one solution to the lack of transport caused by the oil shortage. Incidentally, there are bicycles galore in Cuba now, a result of government imports from China given the difficulty of providing petrol for private cars, of which there are many.

#### *Women deputies in government*

A national survey, using a diary recording method, that explored the competing demands on the time of women elected to municipal, provincial and national *Poder Popular*.

The regional statistical offices such as Armando's would be given or negotiate a brief for the data collection in each of these studies. Only sometimes would he be involved in the policy analysis of the results. Perhaps as a consequence, most of these studies do not produce published reports (limited copies of reports commissioned nationally would be held by INSIE). The scarcity of paper at present means there was no summary of even the most basic

demographic results available from the provincial office, which were previously published in a quarterly bulletin.

Armando clearly felt his time was well spent, although there were light and heavy times in the office. There is no charging of time from one branch of government to another in Cuba.

## **Armando Medina Hill**

"Yes I have English ancestors. My great grandfather was English, but I did not know him. He left for the States at some time. Maybe that's where my pipe-smoking comes from. I was involved with the Catholic church at the time of the revolution, in its leadership in Cienfuegos. But you know I never once had a problem at work because of that. When the arguments between the church and the government occurred my workmates knew my commitment because of my involvement in the literacy campaign; and I joined the militia to defend Cuba. So I could speak my mind, and did, without any problems at work. But I did have problems from the church, who criticised me for my involvement in those campaigns. Eventually I left the catholic church, and step by step came closer to the revolution, though I am not a Party member. I was in the national Bank for 18 years, including when Che was there, and then moved to this job when it was created.

"I like Cuba and what we are doing. How am I not going to? José Martí said something like 'When you look at the sun you see spots on it. The dispirited see only the spots and not the light.' It's that way with Cuba's problems."

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