

Distributed energy systems havana

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In March 2019, Prince Charles was front page news in Cuba. The royal visit to the socialist state - at one brief moment a British colony - received thorough coverage in Granma. Published by the Cuban Communist Party, the newspaper reported that Charles had driven a 1953 Morris T-type through the streets of Havana and inaugurated a solar park in Cuba's new Special Economic Zone. In photographs, the president of Havana Energy, a British-Chinese utility, also flanked the prince. In a joint venture with the Cuban government, Havana Energy is investing in solar energy and biomass solutions for increased renewable energy use in Cuba.

The British state visit makes it evident how Cuba and the UK have normalised diplomatic relations in recent years. In the West, political and economic ties with Cuba were controversial until the rapprochement between Cuba and the United States under the Obama administration. While President Trump has backtracked on Obama's policy, the UK and other EU countries are continuing to improve their relations with Cuba.

For its part, the Cuban government is actively seeking to attract foreign investment in the socialist economy. The electrical industry is a key sector where the Cuban Communist Party has adopted a strategy to achieve a 24 percent transition to renewable energy by 2030. The plan is motivated by Cuba's overall highly progressive environmental agenda and, especially, the need to diminish the country's dependence on oil imports.

Like all Caribbean island-states, Cuba has long maintained a high dependence on oil to fuel its economic and social development. The importance of oil to the socialist economy became clear in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse when the country lost over 85 percent of its oil supplies in the course of a few years. Since 2005, Venezuela has supplied oil to Cuba and the Greater Caribbean in exchange for services and goods, but today, the crisis in Venezuela underscores the region's energy vulnerability. This is the context in which the Cuban government now seeks joint ventures with companies like Havana Energy to develop energy sources available on the Cuban islands.

Decarbonisation and Recentralisation

The current Plan 2030 is a continuation of Cuba's remarkable "Energy Revolution". Launched by Fidel Castro in 2005, this nationwide campaign contributed to reducing the energy intensity of the Cuban economy by 44 percent and the carbon intensity by 32 percent.

In a recent article in Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, I look closely at the Energy Revolution, drawing on long-term research in Cuban industry and households. The article documents Cuba's

partial low-carbon transition in the mid-2000s but also shows how the reconfiguration of Cuba's energy systems did political work in the socialist state. In building and maintaining infrastructure, we shape the conditions for social, economic, and ecological life with far-reaching consequences for human action.

Before the Cuban Revolution in 1959, a private utility based in Florida held an almost complete monopoly over Cuba's electricity infrastructures. With Che Guevara at the helm of industrial policy, a socialist logic instead came to underpin the efforts of national electrification. Under socialism, it was argued, energy would no longer be consumed as a commodity - a service to be extended and accessed based on profitability - but energy would be distributed by the state as an entitlement to the socialist citizen.

When Cuba lost its oil supplies during the 1990s, the state's ability to distribute electricity, cooking fuels, and other energy sources as entitlements to the population came under severe pressure. To stave off the crisis, the government started to schedule blackouts in cities to manage supply and removed electrical appliances from shops to manage demand. At the same time, informal energy supply networks appeared. Cuban small-farmers, for example, found a lucrative market in trading homemade charcoal for use as a cooking fuel. Transport and construction workers could swindle diesel and petrol from state companies and trade it on the blackmarket. Parallel to the ailing state infrastructures, energy was again commodified, undermining the logic of Cuban socialism.

This was the situation when the government launched the Energy Revolution.

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