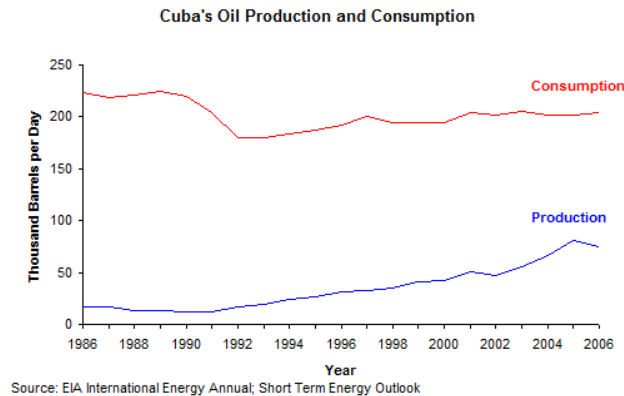


When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, the impact on the Cuban economy was devastating. Cuba lost approximately 80% of its imports, 80% of its exports and its Gross Domestic Product dropped by 34%. Along with food and medicines that were imported, 99% of the oil Cuba imported came from the USSR; Cuba's oil imports dropped to 10% of previous amounts in 1990. Before this, Cuba had been re-exporting any Soviet oil it did not consume to other nations for profit; this was Cuba's second largest export product before 1990. Once Soviet imports fell, Cuba faced a shortage of oil, resulting in a need to reduce domestic consumption by 20% over the course of two years. The effect was felt immediately; dependent on fossil fuels to operate, transportation, industrial and agricultural systems were paralysed. There were extensive losses of productivity in both Cuban agriculture; which was dominated by modern industrial tractors, combines, and harvesters, all of which required oil to run; and in Cuban industrial capacity.



The early stages of the Special Period were defined by a general breakdown in transportation and agricultural sectors, fertilizer and pesticide stocks (both of those being manufactured primarily from oil derivatives), and widespread food shortages, although outright starvation and famine were averted. Organic agriculture was soon after mandated by the Cuban government, supplanting the old industrialized form of agriculture Cubans had grown accustomed to. For a time, waiting for a bus could take three hours, power outages could last up to 16 hours, and food consumption was cut up to 1/5 and the average Cuban lost about 20 pounds. Although starvation was avoided, hunger was a daily experience and initially, malnutrition in children under five was evident after just a few weeks of food shortages.

Further negative impacts on Cuban imports and exports were felt when the U.S. intensified its enforcement of the United States embargo against Cuba in place since the early 1960s and passed three new bills in the coming years. The Mack Amendment (October 1990) "prohibits all trade with Cuba by subsidiaries of U.S. companies outside the U.S." Before this bill passed, 70% of Cuba's trade with U.S. subsidiary companies was for food and medicine. The Toricelli Act (October 1992) also prohibits foreign-based subsidiaries of U.S. companies from trading with Cuba but adds prohibition of travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens, and monetary assistance to family members in Cuba. The law did, however, allow humanitarian aid in the form of food and medicine by private groups. Then in March of 1996, The Helms-Burton Act imposes penalties on foreign companies doing business in Cuba, and allowed U.S. citizens to sue foreign investors who use American-owned property seized by the Cuban government. Due to the external factors contributing to the energy crisis in Cuba, the collapse of the USSR who was their main source of petroleum and food imports, along with the various stages of the US embargo, this is referred to as "artificial" peak oil.

Alternative transportation, most notably the Cuban "camels" — immense 18-wheeler tractor trailers retrofitted as busses to carry many dozens of Cubans each — flourished. Meat and dairy

products, having been extremely fossil fuel dependent in their former factory farming methods, soon diminished in the Cuban diet. By necessity Cubans adopted diets higher in fiber, fresh produce, and ultimately more vegan in character than before the period. Cuba hurriedly diversified its agricultural production, utilizing former cane fields to grow fruit and vegetables. The Cuban government also focused more intensely on cooperation with Venezuela.

The scarcity of tools, and building materials, and the cost of producing cement increased the pressure on already overcrowded housing. Even before the energy crisis, extended families lived in small apartments (many of which were in very poor condition) to be closer to an urban area. To help alleviate this situation, the government engaged in land-distribution where they supplemented larger government owned farms with privately owned ones. Small homes were built in rural areas and land was provided to encourage families to move and assist in food production for themselves and to sell in local farmers' markets. As the film "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil" discusses, co-ops were developed which were owned and managed by groups, as well as creating opportunities for allowing them to form "service co-ops" where credit was exchanged and group purchasing power was used to buy seeds and other necessary items.

Because of the shortage of oil, during the special period, private cars were not common so people used public transport which used, old American cars served as taxis for 6-8 people, canopies and steps were added to trucks, 1.5 million bikes were imported from china and distributed and another half a million were produced in Cuba. "Camels" were semi-trucks flatbeds converted into bus like vehicles that could hold up to 200 passengers, government vehicles picked up passengers as needed, horses and mules were used as well as horse carriages.

Before the crisis, Cuba used more pesticides than the US. Most of their land was so damaged and flooded with chemicals that it took 3-5 years for soil rehabilitation with the use of compost, green manure and practices such as crop rotation and inter planting to return the soil to a healthy state. Bio-fertilizers and bio-chemicals were developed and used. Today 80% of Cuba's produce is grown organically. Another reason Cuba survived this crisis is the shift in their thinking from machine to manual labour and other earth-friendly practices. Abandoning their previous industrialized agricultural methods, tractors and other machinery were replaced with human and animal labour. Older farmers familiar with raising and training oxen trained others to increase those involved in food production. The need for more manual labourers meant that there weren't huge farms but many smaller ones. The documentary states that today, farmers make more money than most other occupations; without food, there is no life. Many crumbling building in the urban area which could not be repaired were demolished, at the time of the crisis these empty areas made perfect places for urban farming.

The ideological changes of the Special Period had effects on Cuban society and culture. The increased responsibilities that Cuban women had within their families as a result of the economic effects also gave them more authority within Cuban society. In recent years, many Cuban women have chosen to enact this power and authority on the dance floor to the music of the pleasure and body-focused reggaeton genre, through highly controversial, explicitly sexual dance moves. Cuban hip hop evolved as a socially conscious movement influenced heavily by the effects of Cuba's conversion to a 'mixed economy' on the younger generation. The arrival of rap in Cuba was very much shaped by this Special period. Eventually rap became nationalized by the government when it was understood as keeping with the goals of the Revolution. Rap artists' lyrics were primarily focused on social issues, which provided critiques of complex issues while maintaining positive energy.