

Cuba under immediate threat from climate change

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Seagulls walk along the shore as tourists wade in ocean waters, in Varadero, Cuba

Cuba's delegation to Cop26 tells DR LAUREN COLLINS about the island's approach to adapting to the effects of global warming, the challenges it faces and its hopes for the outcome of this crucial world summit

IT WAS in 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit, that Fidel Castro said: "Humankind is at risk of disappearing due to the rapid and progressive elimination of its natural habitat.

"We are becoming aware of this problem when it is almost too late to prevent it."

In March 1995, the first Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Cop1) met, yet it was not until Cop21, held in Paris in December 2015, that a legally binding agreement was secured to keep global warming no higher than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

Since then, another six years have passed without decisive and concerted effort by the globe's biggest polluters to avert disaster. As with many other island nations, Cuba is facing immediate and current threats from climate change.

Since the 1950s Cuba's annual average temperature has risen by 0.9°C, cyclone activity has significantly altered, sea levels have risen, and the availability of fresh water has decreased by around 40 per cent, half of which has occurred within the last 20 years.

These changes have serious consequences, turning Cuba's climate from tropical wet to tropical dry, causing more frequent and prolonged droughts, the salination of aquifers and agricultural land, less, but more intense, rainfall, increased solar radiation due to less cloud cover, and the imminent threat of permanent flooding in coastal regions.

Cuba's State Plan to Address Climate Change, known in Cuba as Tarea Vida (Project Life), was adopted by Cuba's national assembly in April 2017.

Cuba already has a very light carbon footprint (0.08 per cent of global emissions) and so the ambitious plan is largely focused on adaptation measures. Its main objectives are to protect human life, and to ensure that every community, large or small, is resilient and can attain a full and prosperous life.

It involves all sectors of the economy and society and is implemented at national and local levels.

The priority areas for Tarea Vida identified in 2020 include coastal protection, agriculture, guaranteeing availability and efficient use of water, reforestation (including mangroves and coral reefs), and increasing risk perception and knowledge in the general population.

In 2019, Cuba adopted by referendum a new constitution which devolved powers to the local level, making the municipalities the main element of the government structure.

As a result, the island is undergoing an intense process to build decision-making processes from the bottom up, which empowers local leadership and facilitates increased engagement of the population in drawing up adaptation plans, particularly in relation to local agriculture and food production and coastal protection.

The Ministry for Science, Technology and the Environment (Citma) liaises closely with local and provincial government, to gain input into its national plans for adapting to changing climatic conditions, and to support the development and implementation of local response plans.

The Cop26 delegation gives an example of how this works in practice. They pointed to the project, Coastal Resilience to Climate Change in Cuba through Ecosystem-Based Adaptation, known as “Mi Costa” (My Coast), approved this year by the Green Climate Fund.

The project involves 24 municipalities in seven provinces and will also restore ecosystems in seven communities.

All of these actions will involve a process of locally relevant capacity building and training at the community level through 24 Capacity-Building Centres (one in each municipality). Communities will be active participants in monitoring the benefits and management of ecosystems and relating them to their lives and livelihoods.

This allows local people to make decisions based on an understanding of their exposure to climate hazards, and by strengthening community capacities they can ensure that adaptation actions are based on local and national realities.

Members of the delegation spoke about the impact that the blockade, imposed by the United States government for more than six decades, has on Cuba’s efforts to adapt to climate change. They said that it affects all sectors of the economy and society and that there is no policy or action that can escape its negative impact.

Emphasizing the serious and permanent commitment that Cuba has to climate action, the delegation told me that Cuba has recently updated its Nationally Determined Contribution as a state party to the Paris Agreement.

It includes much more ambitious commitments both in terms of mitigation and adaptation, the fulfilment of which will require enormous efforts.

Resources are required for its implementation, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement clearly established the need to provide means of implementation (financing, technologies and capacity building) to the developing countries.

As well as the reluctance of some industrialised countries, including the US, to comply with these dispositions, the Cuban delegation said that, in the case of Cuba, there is also the impact of the blockade, which severely restricts the country’s access to resources and financing, and although great efforts are being made to implement the national plan, the blockade imposes additional challenges.

As an example of the level of hostility by the US government towards Cuba, the delegation told me that, in March 2021, when the Green Climate Board was considering Cuba’s application (made jointly with the United Nations Development Programme) for funding for the Mi Costa project, 23 representatives supported the project, and only the US delegate rejected it, on the basis that Cuba is on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Cuba was added to the list under the Trump administration, but this happened under the Biden administration. And this is not the only time that a US delegate has rejected applications by Cuba for funding to tackle climate change.

When asked about their hopes for Cop26, the delegation said that it is crucial that it fully meets its objectives and that the Cuba is ready to work constructively with all the delegations to achieve a successful result commensurate with the urgency of the situation, adding that it is imperative that agreements are reached, and commitments made, to fully comply with United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and achieve full implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Dr Lauren Collins is an honorary research fellow at the University of Nottingham and a member of the executive committee of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign.