This summer I had the privilege to work as one of the first two American interns in Cuba since the Revolution. My gateway into this experience was through the FAO office in Cuba, which worked tirelessly to secure a temporary work visa for me. Like my fellow American intern and Cornell student, Betsy Feldeverd, my trip to Cuba was delayed by more than a month as I waited for my visa to be issued. However I finally made it here in mid-July and was able to extend my trip until October to make up for lost time. Like Betsy, my internship with the FAO was to research and write a report on the potential of conservation agriculture (CA) and the system of rice intensification (SRI) in Cuba. This project coincided well with my major at Cornell, International Agriculture and Rural Development.

As Betsy's departure date drew closer I realized that I had to choose a focus in the project that I could continue after she returned to Ithaca. I decided to concentrate my efforts on researching conservation agriculture, and left the majority of the system of rice intensification research to Betsy. My final product attempts to address as much of the Cuban agricultural and political context as it can to properly evaluate CA's possibility in Cuba. I used national statistic databases to present the distressing reality of Cuba’s fast deteriorating natural resource base, looking at soil degradation rates and over-exploitation of freshwater. Cuba's current food security situation is extremely precarious, with the country importing 80% of all its food. Low levels of production because of inefficient and outdated farming practices based on degrading natural systems are partly responsible for this inefficiency, and recent government initiatives to raise production levels have had little
success. This context emphasizes the necessity for drastic changes in current agricultural practices and CA’s soil and water conservation methodology is a perfect alternative.

I then looked into the principles of CA itself and wrote short country summaries for Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, all of which have had success in adopting CA. I analyzed the common obstacles they shared and their paths to success using farmer organization, private enterprise, and state investment. I concluded that Cuba would benefit more from looking at Paraguay’s experience, as it is more based on state investment and extension than the private-business oriented version of Brazil.

I researched the different types of cooperatives (CPAs, UBPCs, and CCSs), the Farmer-to-Farmer agroecological agriculture movement (MACAC), and the National Small Farmers’ Association (ANAP) as stakeholders in the spread of CA. My analysis found that the CCS cooperatives, which are more established, have the right characteristics needed for CA’s success. They have a higher level of autonomy than the other cooperatives, with the ability to own and inherit land and a well-developed credit-lending service. However I concluded that the UBPCs, a more recent cooperative, whose members are ex-laborers of large state farms and who are given 10 year leases to parcels of land, though less productive and less autonomous, must be integrated into the CA methodology as the current government appears to be supporting UBPCs instead of CCSs. I looked at several government ministries that could be instrumental in the spread of CA, as well as current government initiatives relating to CA, such as the Climate Change Action Plan and the Program to confront desertification and drought.

I concluded that, while CA would bring considerable environmental and economic benefits to Cuba and would work well with an already sound agroecological agriculture
base from MACAC, its success depends largely on the current administration’s support. Unlike in Brazil, where the stimulus of CA’s spread came from small farmers and farmer organizations, the lack of autonomy for Cuban farmers prevents them from accessing the agricultural inputs and extension that would guarantee CA’s nation-wide implementation. Cuban farmers still are required to sell nearly all of their production to government enterprises and cannot import their own machinery, fertilizer, or pesticides - they must rely nearly entirely on government suppliers. No-till agriculture (a key component of CA) requires specialized machinery, and while this can be done with animal traction, most of the countries that have been successful with CA have used these direct seeders. If the Cuban government does not invest and import these technologies, Cuban farmers will be unable to access them and CA’s future in Cuba will be less probable. However the Cuban government has been receptive in the past to investing in sustainable agriculture techniques and technologies, and whether they import direct seeders or develop their own, there is a high chance that they would be willing to invest in CA after witnessing the environmental and economic benefits it can bring. State-run investigations and pilot programs to adapt the CA methodology to local conditions followed by participatory on-farm research and extension are a few strategies that could be used to promote CA in Cuba.

This experience helped me to move forward in my career path. It solidified my desire to work with farmers, sustainable agriculture and international rural development related work in general. The cultural exchange that occurred daily with employees at the FAO office, my host family in my casa particular, and friends and acquaintances added hugely to my stay in Cuba. I will be forever grateful to the FAO for giving me the opportunity that few Americans can have - to live and work in Cuba. My evening and
weekend activities helped me to begin to understand what it means to be a Cuban under the current administration, as well as allowing me to enjoy the vibrant culture and natural beauty of this country. Overall, I found this experience extremely rewarding and it was a key factor in my decision to apply to international development graduate programs for the coming year.