Lessons from Cuba?
Hurricane Michele, November, 2001

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An Unfashionable Question

In 1978 I published a letter in the journal *Disasters* calling for a systematic comparison of socialist and non-socialist countries' success in mitigating the human impacts of extreme natural events. In that letter I contrasted the small loss of life from drowning or subsequent disease during very large floods in the Red River delta of Vietnam with the estimated huge loss of life calculated by U.S military planners when they preparing to bomb the Red River levees and dikes. I suggested that researchers should look carefully at preparedness, mitigation, and recovery in socialist countries such as China, Cuba, the USSR, Somalia, and Mozambique [1]

Today three of these countries no longer claim to be socialist; indeed, Somalia is arguably still without a viable central government following years of civil war, and some consider Mozambique to be a ward of overseas donors as it recovers from a savage war of destabilization against its Marxist liberation front turned central government.

With no apology for my juvenilia, I still believe that the question I put in 1978 is relevant to disaster research and to risk reduction policy and practice.

In a muted way this discussion has continued. Best known is Amartya Sen's opinion that China's "great leap famine" in the late 1950s that may have cost 30 million lives would not have been possible in India, where a free press points out harvest failures and monitors government action or inaction. This picture is complicated by comparison of more recent experience.[2]

My point in this brief note is simply to say that the jury is still out, and that the recent experience of hurricane Michelle in Cuba should tells us that.

Hurricane Michelle

Hurricane Michelle was a dangerous category 3 storm (on the five point Saffir-Simpson scale). It made landfall at the Bay of Pigs on Cuba's southern coast (ironically, where the