Creating the Urban Agriculture Forum in Belo Horizonte: a multi-stakeholder experience

This paper summarises work attempting to answer two apparently simple questions: Can urban agriculture reduce urban poverty? And, if it can, in what ways can poverty be reduced? It also explores the role of value chain analysis in understanding better the role of urban agriculture.

Since the election of the first democratic and popular administration in Belo Horizonte (BH), Brazil, in 1993, urban agriculture has steadily increased in this metropolitan area. In 2005, the NGO REDE and the municipality of Belo Horizonte (PBH) worked together in creating the conditions for the RUAF Cities Farming for the Future Programme (CFP). The main result of the CFP Programme in BH was the development of a planning and management instrument, the City Strategic Agenda (or Action Plan) on urban agriculture, which encouraged a dialogue between the public sector and civil society and created space for dialogue and management (implementing, reviewing and monitoring the impacts of the agreed activities).

The multi-stakeholder Forum on urban agriculture in Belo Horizonte was created during CFP and officially inaugurated during the seminar entitled “Belo Horizonte Farming for the Future: Urban Agriculture as an Instrument for Managing the City”, on June 2, 2008. It currently consists of 49 institutions.

Management of the Forum is illustrated in figure 1. The Plenary is the highest-level decision-making institution, made up of all those interested in working with the Forum. The Plenary approves, monitors and evaluates the Action Plan (or City Strategic Agenda); it further defines the priorities for each biennium, and also elects the Steering Committee and the Working Groups. The Steering Committee (Grupo Gestor) is made up of institutions selected by the Plenary, together with the Executive Secretariat. It coordinates the Working Groups, implementation of the Action Plan and the various government sectors and civil society groups whose work is related to urban agriculture, whether they are participants in the Forum or not. The Steering Committee is currently made up of the municipality of Belo Horizonte (PBH), represented by the Deputy Municipal Secretariat of Nutritional Food Security (SMASAN) and the Municipal Park Foundation, IPES-IVana Cristina Lovo, Katia Maria Silveira Pessoa, Zoraya Bernadete Souza, Sonia de Fátima Rabelo Coutinho, Ana Barros, Daniela Almeida.

The Urban Agriculture Action Plan

The Action Plan has six strategic objectives to be reached through operational objectives and strategic actions in the short, medium and long term. It covers a period of 10 years – from 2008 to 2018. The Action Plan requires constant dialogue and planning of actions, so that all those involved can agree on the short-term objectives and seek alternatives as needed.

The Action Plan itself has no specific budget, but consists of actions proposed by the stakeholders of the Forum, which can be already-planned activities or new projects. In the 2009-2010 period, the Forum implemented actions at a total cost of USD 800,000 (see table 1). In addition to the resources listed in the table, the Action Plan is also supported through the efforts and resources of other actors, like the participating organisations of the Metropolitan Urban Agriculture Organization (AMAU), the University of Minas Gerais, other NGOs and departments of the PBH, and through the work done and hours spent by the farmers participating in the productive groups.
Bianurnal plans include a prioritised list of activities for each period, and a division of responsibilities among the members of the Steering Committee and other stakeholders participating in the Forum. Each local stakeholder has implemented some activities in the Plan, in line with their own institutional priorities.

In the period 2008-2010, 25 percent of the strategic actions were implemented and 33 percent were in the process of being implemented. Particular progress had been made related to institutionalising a policy on urban agriculture in Belo Horizonte. In the period 2009-2010 three proposed laws related to urban agriculture were discussed by the City Council. Law No. 9.959/10, related to the City Conference, a participatory process in city planning, was approved and included a review of the Master Land Use Plan, which recognises urban agriculture as an accepted form of non-residential land use. Law No. 274/2009, on establishing a municipal urban agriculture policy, was discussed in 2009 and 2010 within meetings of the Steering Committee of the Forum, and in an expanded meeting held in the City Council, which led to substantive changes in the proposed law; the revised version was approved on 9 June 2011. Other noteworthy achievements in the area of institutionalisation are the initiative of the Northeast Administrative Regional Office which led to substantive changes in the proposed law; the preliminary dissemination of the impacts of urban agriculture led to the production of academic publications (articles, monographs, master and doctor theses) and specialised journals. The next evaluation of the implementation of the Action Plan on urban agriculture is scheduled to take place by mid-2011, with a municipal seminar, during which participants will evaluate what was done during the previous two-year period (2011-2012) and select a new Steering Committee.

With the objective of training farmers, public officials, community agents, and the university community in urban agriculture, agro-ecology and economic solidarity, the Rede-MG carried out a number of activities under the auspices of the CAAUP-RMBH – Urban and Periurban Agriculture Support Centre of the Belo Horizonte Metropolitan Region. These activities became part of a broad-based and ongoing training programme.

The FStT Project and the CAAUP-RMBH were monitored through the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), based on the pioneering initiative of the Cities Farming for the Future Programme (CFF). The preliminary dissemination of the impacts of urban agriculture led to the production of academic publications (articles, monographs, master and doctor theses) and specialised journals. The next evaluation of the implementation of the Action Plan on urban agriculture is scheduled to take place by mid-2011, with a municipal seminar, during which participants will evaluate what was done during the previous two-year period (2011-2012) and select a new Steering Committee.

Lessons Learned
Developing and agreeing on an Action Plan with a variety of stakeholders was an important step in realising collective action that involves civil society and the public sector. The joint definition of priority objectives and actions was important to avoid duplication of efforts and the defence of isolated institutional and organisational interests. In addition, as Lovo (2011) states, the effectiveness of a certain strategic action depends on the interests and priorities of each institution. Therefore, the Action Plan focused not only on collective investments and actions, but also on the activities and priorities of each individual institution. Each organisation incorporated and committed itself to the strategic objectives agreed on within the context of the Forum, thereby maximising the potential of the points of convergence among the different participants, creating synergies, and not emphasising the differences between them. Furthermore, including actions in the short, medium and long term is essential.
long term made it possible to engage in ongoing dialogue and planning, and to focus on the agreed objectives.

The Forum also provided an opportunity to experiment with new ways of relating, primarily through the work of its Steering Committee and the creation of the Working Groups. Especially important is the work of institutions which have historically promoted urban agriculture in Belo Horizonte, but that did not communicate or enter into dialogue with other institutions about their work. However, experiences with the Forum also showed that there are limits in connecting civil society and government, such as those caused by differences in political priorities and expectations in terms of the timelines of project and programme execution. On several occasions, habitual reactions prevailed, such as the authoritarian postures of the government, or civil society merely making demands.

Initially the role of facilitator under the CFF programme (and as continued under FSTT) was important, but increasingly the participating institutions themselves became interested in continuation of the forum, and now see it as an important platform for dialogue and planning, as supported by Article 07 in Law 274/2009. However, Implementation of actions and spending is still done in an isolated manner in most cases. Each institution applies resources in their area of responsibility, without discussing how to do this within the Steering Committee or the plenary meetings of the Forum. Achieving a more holistic discussion about the set of activities that each stakeholder carries out could be one way to improve, integrate and maximise the available resources within implementation of the Action Plan for urban agriculture.

One challenge in expanding urban agriculture in Belo Horizonte is to emphasise mechanisms that encourage the involvement of the productive groups, so that they take ownership of the Action Plan and prioritise their participation in its planning, monitoring and execution.

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Notes
1) It was also around that time that the School and Community Garden Programmes and Pro-Pomar (a programme on fruit trees), all coordinated by the Deputy Municipal Secretariat for Food Supply, were created. Another initiative that stood out at that time (and lasted until 2001) was establishment of the Agro-Ecological Experience Centers (CEVAEs), which addressed the challenge of preparing and implementing the local Agenda 21. The CEVAEs received international recognition.

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National Urban Agriculture Policy and Programmes in Brazil
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Brazilian urban farmers are conventional family farmers – even though many of them are in the process of transitioning to agro-ecological and organic farming (including certification) – located in periurban areas, indigenous and quilombolo groups, poor urban residents located in inner and periurban areas, and especially female heads of household and older adults between 30 and 50 years of age. In Brazil, the government (local, state and federal) is important in financing urban and periurban agriculture experiences, implemented by both municipal governments and by civil society. Community organizations and social movements, who implement urban and periurban agriculture activities by mobilizing their own resources, is also a characteristic of the Brazilian experience.

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The urban and periurban agriculture policy in Brazil

Of the 12 million families attended to by the Bolsa Família Programme, more than 7 million live in urban areas, and it is for this reason that its efforts are focused in the cities and metropolitan regions of Brazil. Within this programme and as part of its Zero Hunger strategy, the Ministry for Social Development and Combating Hunger (MDS) implements the National Urban and Periurban Agriculture Policy focusing its actions on the urban and periurban population, linking them to its Social Protection Network and its Network of Public Food and Nutrition Establishments, which involves Soup Kitchens, Food Banks, Community Kitchens, Food Fairs and Popular Markets.

The national policy for urban and periurban agriculture is based on the principles of the Food and Nutritional Security Law (LOSAN) and forms part of the recently passed National Policy for Food and Nutritional Security (PNSAN) which promotes the “development of sustainable and de-centralized food production, extraction, processing and distribution systems based on agro-ecological systems” in order to strengthen “family agricultural processes and urban and periurban food production”

The policy is based on a set of policy principles and guidelines that include: i) promoting the production, processing and commercialization of urban and periurban products; ii) strengthening urban and periurban farmer’s social organizations; iii) high quality training and technical assistance for urban and periurban farmers; iv) training for those that implement policy; v) support for agro-ecology techniques and economic solidarity; and vi) the formation of the Public Services Network.

As from 2006, IPES and RUAF have been in contact with the MDS and have supported the processes of forming and implementing policy together with other national and regional stakeholders, like the NGO Network for the Exchange of Alternative Technologies (REDE) and the FAO’s Regional Office.

The MDS created an office of the General Coordinator of Urban Agriculture, and since 2004 has been funding public tenders which, as of 2009, had resulted in the spending of over US$35 million on promoting gardens in municipalities (from 2004), implementing Support Centres for Urban and Periurban Agriculture in Metropolitan Regions (from 2008), support for the development of urban agriculture economic solidarity projects with the Technological Incubators of Popular Cooperatives (16 Brazilian Universities) (from 2007), direct local commercialization through Popular Market Fairs (from 2007) and various actions to improve food security in areas that have experienced agrarian reform (from 2005).

The Urban and Periurban Agriculture Centres (UPAC) are important in the implementation of a decentralized operational system that supplies services to urban farmers, coordinating initiatives and social stakeholders interested in supporting urban agriculture. A large part of the funds for the UPACs have been used to provide high-quality, free public services for urban farmers, emphasising the social and public nature of the policy, and helping to reinforce the role of the State in policy implementation. The UPACs seek to coordinate the actions of other stakeholders who carry out interventions at the local level – such as NGOs, universities, research institutes, municipalities and states, among others – who are considered to be policy implementers.

Virtual and on-site training courses have been offered in partnership with IPES/RUAF and the FAO/RLC, designed to improve the capacities of experts and managers who work for the Support Centres and the MDS team.

The National UPA Group is a forum for participation and consultation, strategy planning, monitoring and evaluation of policy implementation. It operates in close coordination with the Office of the Urban Agriculture Coordinator and is made up of representatives from the Centres.

Since 2006, the promotion of urban and periurban agriculture has also been part of south-south cooperation. The MDS has been part of the RUAF and IPES Regional Advisory Council for Latin America and the Caribbean, and as part of its outreach activities has participated in International UPA Seminars organized by the FAO, IPES, RUAF and various national and local governments held in La Paz (2007) and Medellin (2009). The MDS presented its experience at the 2008 World Urban Forum in China and co-organized a special event for the 2010 World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro in conjunction with the RUAF Foundation, IPES, the World Bank and the FAO. Finally it has carried out technical support actions in the cities of Rosario (Argentina) and Lima (Peru), as well as providing support for the urban agriculture cooperation agreements with the Cuban and Ecuadorian governments.

The design and implementation of Brazil’s urban and periurban agriculture policy demonstrates the importance of developing specific policies, which can contribute to policies already in place, like food and nutritional security policies.

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References