

Just like other cities in the country and around the world, Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, is undergoing rapid population growth leading to more pronounced social inequalities. In 2005, this city of approximately 6.8 million people had a poverty rate of 38.5 percent, and most of the poor were suffering from significant nutritional deficiencies due to the lack of access to food in the necessary quantities and quality.



Jardín Botánico de Bogotá

There is always space for plants

Promoting a City without Hunger and Indifference: urban agriculture in Bogotá, Colombia

In an effort to improve the population's standard of living, and as part of its social policies, the current municipal administration – led by Mayor Luis Eduardo Garzon – implemented a district development plan called “Bogotá without indifference – A social commitment against poverty and exclusion”. This plan encompasses a number of programmes, including Bogotá Without Hunger, which involves a number of activities intended to improve the nutritional status of vulnerable groups in the district. One of its main initiatives is the urban agriculture project led by the José Celestino Mutis Botanic Garden.

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This initiative recognises the practices of the residents and encourages growing crops in urban areas as an alternative source of food for self-consumption, in addition to promoting environmental conservation, the strengthening of the social fabric and the appropriation of land through citizen participation.

In general terms, the project's activities are aimed at:

- complementing basic biological research with applied research in an urban context, for the sustainable use of some native plant species with high nutritional value;
- carrying out exchanges of agricultural knowledge and know-how using clean technologies in spaces called Educational Nuclei with the communities of the city of Bogotá;
- promoting environmental education initiatives to improve awareness and healthy habits and encourage the consumption of food with high nutritional value;
- promoting participatory community alliances that can strengthen urban agricultural activities and neighbourhood ties, and thereby contribute to a better quality of life.

Bogotá is one of the pilot cities of the Cities Farming for the Future Programme (CFF) of the RUA Foundation, and implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean by IPES - Promotion of Sustainable Development. As part of its activities, a local team made up of the Botanic Garden and the University of Rosario is developing a participatory diagnostic assessment of urban agriculture in order to identify and analyse the stakeholders, describe the legal and regulatory framework, identify available spaces and prepare a situational analysis of urban agriculture and agriculturalists. The study area encompasses the Bosa Central area, located in Bosa, one of the poorest districts of Bogotá. By the end of 2007, it is hoped that there will be a multi-stakeholder alliance made up of various institutions and civil society organisations interested in urban agriculture along with policy guidelines that promote urban farming as a permanent activity in the Capital District.

URBAN AGRICULTURE IN BOGOTÁ

The urban agriculture project in Bogotá began at the end of 2004 and has made it possible to implement a wide variety of activities in applied research, thereby promoting local know-how and

improving the quality of life of the vulnerable communities of the district.

Applied Research. This is one of the central activities of the Botanical Garden, which carries out basic research and transforms it into applied research, focusing both on native species (quinua, amaranth, cubios, hibias, chugas, etc.) with high nutritional value which are being reintroduced to people's diet, as well as traditionally consumed exotic species (lettuce, spinach, carrots, gooseberry, etc.). Research includes the use of different containers and alternative substrates, which is very necessary in the urban context. Currently, 60 edible species are being studied.

Nuclei of education and knowledge exchange. The techniques of raising crops in containers and in the ground that come out of the research are transferred to the project's target group through the educational nuclei that exist throughout the city. It is important to highlight that in addition to training, a rich exchange of know-how takes place with the participants, who have a vast amount of knowledge about traditional agriculture, often stemming from their rural origins. To date, there are 124 educational nuclei operating throughout Bogotá, and more than 31,000 people have been trained, including over 1,000 urban farmers in the city and many people with great potential and interest in getting involved in the activity.

The nuclei also work, both theoretically and practically, on various issues related to agronomic management, the application of clean technologies (organic waste management, the collection of rainwater, the use of alternative energies like solar), citizen participation and the construction of networks. The latter are built through exchanges of know-how among neighbours and people from other neighbourhoods and distant parts of our city, as well as through visits to other interesting urban farmers, who offer them new ideas on how to improve production or local exchange. To date, more than 50 neighbourhood and local exchanges and tours have taken places, which have been very helpful and useful to the beneficiaries.

WHO ARE THE BENEFICIARIES?

A vulnerable existence is one characterised by one or more of the following

factors: a high level of economic dependence, a lack of housing, malnutrition, a lack of education and training, impossible access to health care and living in settlements that are environmentally at risk. Vulnerability quickly leads to poverty, and for that reason, the project's activities seek to influence the causes of poverty and not its effects. As a medium-term strategy, urban agriculture training is planned and carried out in vulnerable communities. Included in this vulnerable population are, among many other groups, women heads of household, prisoners in various penitentiaries in the city, people with HIV, the displaced¹ and the reincorporated², and students.

Despite the low levels of participation registered in many sector-specific programmes and projects, the urban agriculture project is one which enjoys relatively high levels of permanence and replication of the activities learned about during the trainings. The methodology of intervention is simple. Initially, the project identifies the local resources possessed by the population, and then encourages the adoption of innovative strategies which seek to solve or complement existing nutritional needs. The project's activities promote the alternative production of quality food by linking traditional and scientific knowledge, which is a key aspect of the project's approach. This allows the community to gain recognition in the city, and for its knowledge to be valued.

Among the different experiences with specific population groups, one that stands out is the work done by NGOs that trained people with slight mental retardation, deaf-mutes and people with Tourette syndrome aged 26 to 61. With this group, training efforts included the planting of different kinds of produce to create a large salad. The intention was also for the participants to forge relationships through the activities without forgetting what has been learned, which proved to be a difficult and challenging task.

At Buen Pastor – a prison facility of the National Institute of Penitentiaries of Colombia (INPEC) – work was done with different groups of women, including maximum security inmates and others soon to be released. In working with them, it was possible to lower their anxiety and the levels of aggression and conflict that exist among those living together in a

penitentiary. In some cases, it was even possible to arrange it so that the time spent working counted towards a reduction in the sentence. Many of the women expressed their desire to replicate the experience in their homes once they are released. Urban agriculture practices offered them the option to reflect on their lives, and on what they can do when they are out of prison. Similar experiences took place in the La Picota and La Modelo penitentiaries.

Work with older adults (people over 60) has also taken place at most of the locations, and has led to better health thanks to the participants' improved outlook and feeling of being useful and recognised for their knowledge of agriculture, "...working in the garden made me feel alive and worth something..." said one of the urban farmers.

Another group the urban agriculture project in Bogotá focuses on is people who are HIV-positive. Under traditional protocols, they only receive care, and are treated as passive objects rather than as subjects of their own growth and change. However, through Participatory Action and city farming practices, they are able to develop their potentials as protagonists in their own lives, where co-responsibility and the joint completion of tasks are very important achievements.

"A friend from the group of HIV-infected invited me to participate in the urban agriculture course, and I liked it. My sister helps me take care of the plants; she has a physical limitation and this work is a distraction for her. When the family earns income, we all decide what will be done with it; there is no discrimination here. I am from Tunja (a small city); I always lived in the city and never had anything to do with agriculture. I was a hairdresser but currently the salon is closed. I don't belong to any other groups in the area, because there are complications and I prefer to live my life peacefully."

Manuel, urban farmer – person living with HIV/Aids.

The reincorporated population, people who have participated as combatants in the internal armed conflict, has had a special place in the project. The work done with young people from 12 to 19 years old, who have experienced the

horrors of war first hand, has been one of the most difficult undertakings so far in the project. Their memories of their places of origin – mostly rural – are brought to the surface through practicing urban agriculture. The person leading them has to modify the design of the trainings to fit their specific needs. The participants now live in the big city and are being trained together with people from the community rather than separately, which provides them with more support as they reintegrate themselves into civilian life.

The large displaced population resulting from the internal conflict and the migrations caused by the poverty gripping many areas of the country possesses a wealth of agricultural knowledge and know-how which is often put into practice when they get to the city. This provides them with a link to their place of origin. For this reason, many of the people who have been farming in the city for years feel affirmed when project specialists talk to them about an issue they know a lot about. This affirmation leads them to reconsider their ideas about the area in the city where they live (often in very

difficult conditions), where rural is not seen as backwards, but rather as a way to improve their living conditions. Urban agriculture thus promotes greater urban-rural linkages.

“Urban agriculture is very satisfying for me. They have taught us a lot. We were not doing anything, I was very bored and this farming makes us happy. When I didn’t have anything to do, I would get nostalgic.... because I was used to working. Now, with my co-workers, we plan what we are going to do on our little plot. I think that with this, I can move forward and teach more people what I have learned.... it seems like a great idea to me to farm in the city, because the crops are in the house or very close. I wish everyone would grow crops because a lot of food would be produced.... I, at least, have made a lot of products like compost and earthworms, which I can sell and with that income buy things that we need in the house. I am happy to be farming with a group; one works better as part of a team.”

Ruben, urban farmer – displaced since 2002

One of the outcomes of the programme is that the population has begun to apply the knowledge shared through the education nuclei. The fruits of their actions have begun to influence their way of seeing the city, of building it and living in it, despite the difficult economic conditions they endure.

ENDNOTES

¹ A displaced person is any person who has been forced to move within the national territory, abandoning his or her residence and/or habitual economic activities, because their lives, their physical safety, security or personal liberties have been harmed mainly due to internal conflict and violence. The project also works with people who have been economically displaced from their region.

² Reincorporated people are those men and women who have demobilised in the framework of agreements with armed groups operating outside of the law (paramilitaries and guerrillas) with whom the national government has engaged in a peace process and who are willing to rejoin civilian life.



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During a training, an alternative use of egg shells is demonstrated



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Investment in natural capital such as soil fertility is also minimal – so the low inherent soil fertility presents a major challenge for gardeners. Soil fertility analyses revealed that within the garden plots, soil fertility was strongly influenced by the resourcefulness of the individual users; some gardeners were severely depleting soil minerals, whereas others were maintaining or in a few cases even improving soil fertility. The analyses also revealed that certain parameters, such as pH and phosphorus were strongly influenced by the initial liming and fertilisation performed by the Department of Agriculture upon garden establishment. The general decline in soil fertility which was evident demonstrated the community’s lack of knowledge on soil fertility maintenance and its inability to carry out larger investments/operations.

How can the community gardens be sustained? The most sustainable community gardens were those with more resourceful members in a position to ensure the functioning of the gardens. Therefore, if the community gardens are

to offer services to vulnerable groups, external support is vital. This was evidenced, for example, in analyses on the fertility of soils, in which signs of initial intervention (traces of phosphorous and liming) could still be detected years later. Furthermore, crop diversity was much higher in irrigated gardens, demonstrating the importance of and need for infrastructure and formalisation. Formalisation in particular is important for recognition of tenure security and to ensure that both gardeners as well as public institutions are interested in investing resources in the gardens.

Gardening generally loses its prime importance when other livelihood opportunities arise; hence the creation of a productive, self-sufficient, economically viable vegetable garden is difficult to achieve – in addition to the fact that competition with supermarkets is fierce. The success criteria of community gardens should therefore also include facets of community building and community services – elements which are not readily on offer in a struggling community. The creation

of a self-confident, skilled and motivated group of producers is needed in order to realise the potential of the community gardens. The NGO that helped initiate the gardens continues to be an important resource with regard to support and training. Considering the current institutional setting, support from local NGOs is imperative. Unfortunately, as evidenced here, the reliance of weaker groups on NGOs is not in itself a viable path to ensuring the sustainability of community gardens.

ENDNOTE

1. See for example article by Marshall Smith (2005), which describes community gardening in Umlazi Township south of Durban.

References

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