Urban Farmers’ Network of Villa Maria Del Triunfo

In various cities in Latin America, local governments have supported the organisation of urban farmers. The preferred form is usually a network, because of its flexibility. In this way the farmers work collectively, but without any formalisation. Two such farmers’ networks can be found in Villa María del Triunfo and Rosario (see box). In the city of Villa María del Triunfo (VMT) in Lima, Peru, urban agriculture is primarily carried out by members of the Urban Farmers’ Network, which currently includes more than 2,000 agricultural producers, and which is undergoing a period of formalisation and consolidation.

Villa María del Triunfo is a municipality of almost 70 km² located on the outskirts of Lima. In 2001, the Municipality of Villa María del Triunfo decided to promote urban agriculture as a strategy to fight poverty (see UAM 16). Urban agriculture was at first practiced only in back and/or front yards of houses and on hillsides. Currently, it is also practiced on community and institutional land. In a participatory assessment carried out during 2005, it was found that 82% of the farmers are women, and 83% migrated from the interior of the country.

The Urban Farmers’ Network began to form in 2002. Its roots can be traced to an initiative taken by a group of eight families in the area of Nueva Esperanza, who were seeking to take advantage, in an organised way, of training and inputs offered by the Urban Agriculture Programme of the municipality. This initial group appointed a coordinator in charge of managing the training and municipal support for the farms. Other families became motivated to organise themselves after seeing the results in the implementation of the community farms (huertos).

The municipality formally recognised this form of self-managed organisation by farmers, as it became clear that the farmers achieved greater effectiveness in promotional activities and in the use of human and financial resources as a group than when they were not organised. As a result, municipal officials began to promote this kind of interaction among farmers in other municipal zones.

Although the groups remained active in their respective farms or collective plots, they did not manage to consolidate linkages between the different zones of the municipality, nor at the level of the whole municipality. In 2005, progress was made in linking these groups. Networking was stimulated through the multi-stakeholder process (see UAM 16) under the project called “Villa Maria Planting Seeds for Life” (see box). A participatory assessment was carried out on the situation of urban agriculture, with the active participation of the urban farmers. These encounters allowed the farmers of the district to get to know each other better, to interact, and above all, to share and identify the limitations, potential and alternative solutions for urban agriculture in the municipality.

The farmers discovered that they had common problems and challenges, which stimulated them to take on the challenge of creating linkages on a larger scale. They decided to begin by reinforcing the organisations at the level of the zones, and elected zone coordinators, who were sworn in during a public ceremony witnessed by members of the District Urban Agriculture Forum. The agriculturalists agreed to implement a series of joint activities, some to stimulate the multi-stakeholder process, and others to reinforce their technical-productive capacities.

The zone coordinators identified a number of priorities among the farmers’ demands for training and technical assistance, including implementation of new community farms, raising small animals, generating inputs, transformation (processing) of products, commercialisation, and the management and organisation of agricultural producers.

A training programme for network members has now been implemented in all of the zones of the district, under an inter-institutional agreement carried out by four members of the Urban Agriculture Forum amongst which the network itself. The network is also developing, with support from IPES, a brand and logo for the products its farmers produce and it is working on a proposed document for the formal organisation of urban agriculturalists. This document should describe the objectives, roles and functions of the Urban Farmers’ Network. It is hoped that once the discussions are over, the network will achieve formal status and will democratically elect its representatives at the district level.

Considering that Villa Maria is a city that is physically and socially fragmented at zone and district levels, with very few organisations of a district-wide character, the progress made in the organisation of urban farmers is a great qualitative leap forward for them and for the city itself.

The organisation and formalisation of the Urban Farmers’ Network provides visibility for the farmers, but it is intended most importantly to strengthen and empower them so that they can participate in decision-making forums, like the participatory budget and local consensus-building roundtables (i.e. of gender, the fight against poverty), and actively contribute to the holistic development of the city.
The huerteros (urban farmers or gardeners) of Rosario, who are mostly poor urban dwellers, have joined together in a non-formal network in order to reinforce their achievements and their presence in the management of the city. Currently, this network is undergoing a process of organisational strengthening.

In 2005, a participatory project to consolidate the Huerteros network was developed by the NGO CEPAR and the Municipality of Rosario. It was implemented in four stages:  
• Reflection on the purpose of the organisation, and the principles and values  
• Agreement on the operational structure of the network  
• Formalisation of the network  
• Creation of a local agenda for the network.

A 25-member Board of Directors was created (5 delegates per district) for the purpose of carrying out democratic and participatory management. The network currently includes 600 huerteros and is implementing a local agenda established by its members.

The huerteros have demonstrated the advantages of being organised

The local agenda of the network includes the following:  
• Network Organisation and Management: developing a democratic decision-making mechanism and strengthening internal communication channels (through decentralised meetings, and a massive membership campaign).  
• Training of members in management and productive capacities (production, transformation and sales of UA products).  
• Strengthening of the strategy for forming alliances with academic and research institutions, cooperation agencies, local and national governments and consumers (through awareness-raising campaigns on the consumption of organic products sold at farmers’ markets).  
• Promotion of new sources of income tied to network activities in the context of an economy of solidarity. The proposal is to carry out production agreements with other groups of producers for the provision of tools and infrastructure for the huertas. This involves groups that produce fence posts, tools and other needed items.  
• Lobbying and advocacy carried out by the network to achieve stability in urban agriculture activities. For this, the creation of a legal framework to support these new kinds of economic relations is indispensable.

The huerteros have demonstrated the advantages of being organised. By working together in the farmers’ markets, they have been able to establish better relationships, based on ethics and respect. Their work has given them the opportunity to support their families – through the generation of a dignified wage – and provided their community and wider society with the possibility to consume high-quality produce.

They have been able to put vacant lots to productive use, thereby transforming the neighbourhood landscape and contributing to a healthier habitat. Their active participation has allowed them to influence public policies and practice, like the preparation of ordinances to obtain secure tenure of their land and the creation of agribusinesses using funds from the participatory budget voted on by citizens.

NOTES

1) Urban Agriculture Assessment in Villa Maria del Triunfo, CCF-IPES/RUAF.  
2) The project was developed in the context of the global programme “Cities Farming for the Future” implemented by IPES as regional partner in the RUAF Foundation.  
3) The Urban Agriculture Forum, initiated by the RUAF Foundation, is the multi-stakeholder space for consensus-building and action that brings together 20 institutions active at the local level in Villa Maria del Triunfo. These include the local government, farmers, educational institutions, NGOs, national governmental entities, and international organisations.