

URBAN GARDENS INCREASE FOOD SECURITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS: HABANA, CUBA

**Catherine Murphy
Master en Desarrollo Social**

Cuba is one of the few countries in the world that sees food as a human right. But like all Caribbean countries, the historical obstacles of dependency and underdevelopment have proven insurmountable. In 1988, after 30 years of high investment to develop Cuban agriculture for a national food production system, Cuba still imported 57% of its total foodstuffs from the Soviet Bloc. These imports -along with an equitable distribution system- allowed Cuba to eradicate hunger. Cuba became the only country in the Third World with no malnutrition.

But the Soviet Bloc collapsed in 1989, and Cuba lost the food imports upon which it depended for an adequate supply of food. Cuba also lost the imported agricultural inputs upon which the agricultural system had become dependent. Soon after, the United States tightened its 28 years old economic embargo against the island nation by passing the Torricelli Law. This law banned trade between Cuba and foreign subsidiaries of US companies. Most of this trade had been in foodstuffs, and most of these import sources were lost. This marked the beginning of serious food shortages that shook the entire country, but nowhere as much as Havana.

Havana is Cuba's capital city, home to over 2 million people, 20% of Cuba's population, and is the largest city in the Caribbean. Before 1989, Havana had no urban agricultural sector, and depended on the Cuban countryside and foreign imports for its entire food supply. When these sources were cut off, and food shortages began, Havana residents responded en masse, planting food crops on porches, balconies, backyards and nearby empty lots. Groups of neighbours planted beans, tomatoes, bananas, lettuce, okra, eggplant, and taro, in spaces that had previously been used as informal dumping grounds. Many raised small animals like chickens, or pigs if they had room. Within two years, there were gardens and farms in every neighbourhood of the city.

The Cuban Ministry of Agriculture and Havana's city government sought to support this grassroots movement, jointly forming an Urban Agriculture Department in 1994. This department first focused on security land use rights for urban gardeners, and committed to provide land -free of charge- to all people who wanted to grow food in the city. "Every empty lot should have a garden," exclaimed the leadership of the time. "No space in the city should go uncultivated." Local gardeners were given plots of land, showing nothing but an identification card, and selling permits were guaranteed at the first sign of a harvest.

The gardeners were full of enthusiasm, but they had little knowledge of the small scale, intensive, agroecological methods required for successful urban gardening. The Urban Agriculture Department set out to address this by providing extension services for city gardeners. Extension teams were organized for 13 of Havana's 15 municipal districts. Extension workers were placed in specific neighborhoods in order to facilitate close personal relationships with local producers and their gardens. This grassroots structure has facilitated trust and accountability both essential to a good extension process. All of Havana's extensionists are state employees, but respond to local needs of decentralized neighborhoods. They are encouraged not to specialize in any one aspect of agriculture, but to be general practitioners and to have a holistic approach to gardening. The personal approach allowed for a rapid transfer of knowledge, and within a small number of years, Havana gardeners have learned many new techniques, and are employing them with increasing success.

To provide the city's gardeners with the supplies that they need, "Seed Houses" were opened in ten different municipalities. The Seed Houses not only sell seeds, but tools, worm compost, biological control products at very low prices. They also provide extension/advice services, and will make consultation visits to nearby gardens. The Seed Houses are public/private partnerships, which benefit from state affiliation, but have a high degree of economic and administrative autonomy.

Many of Cuba's agricultural research institutes have also become involved, linking research to the needs and issues of city gardens. The research centers work closely with the city's extensionists and Seed Houses. Several institutes have begun to produce organic fertilizers and pest control products that they now distribute to urban gardeners through the Seed Houses. The research centers also provide extension services in their area of expertise, working closely with the city extension services and the Seed House consultants. These different support services from a complimentary and overlapping network and -far from competing- work together for the common goal of improving urban agriculture and supporting the growers in their city.

With this kind of support, Havana's farms and gardens have flourished. There are now more than 30, 000 people growing food in more that 8, 000 farms and gardens in the city.

The gardens are extremely heterogeneous, but are roughly divided into four main groups; huertos populares, autoconsumos, organoponicos, and State enterprises, ranging in size from a few square food to several acres. Havana also has an urban campesino sector, with 2, 200 small farms inside city limits.

Huertos populares (literary, "popular gardens") are tended by individuals, families, or groups of neighbors. These are self-provisioning gardens in which

people primarily grow food for themselves, their families, and their closest friends and neighbors.

Most of these gardens donate a regular amount of produce to local daycare centers, primary schools, and needy neighbors. Any excess may be sold, providing an important income supplement for gardening families. Thousands of popular gardeners have organized themselves into Horticultural Clubs, which pool resources, information, large or heavy work jobs, and share social events. These are over 800 Clubs in the city today.

Autoconsumos are self-provisioning gardens run by schools, hospitals, factories, and other workplaces. Over 350 workplaces in Havana have autoconsumo gardens which grow good for students, patients and employees.

Organoponicos are urban vegetable gardens using raised container bed made with concrete or stone retaining walls. Several large national enterprises have farms in the city, producing fruit, milk and meat for local consumption. Havana's farms and gardens produce fresh fruit, vegetables, roots and tuber crops, and culinary and medicinal herbs. Increasing numbers raise small animals. Most gardens are on public land held by the growers in long term usufruct.

In 1997, these urban farms and gardens provided 30, 000 tons of vegetables, tubers and fruits, 3, 650 ton of meat, 7,5 million eggs, and 3,6 tons of medicinal plant material. There are also been a widespread popular rice production strategy, contributing greatly to the city's food security. Although urban productions does not provide for all of Havana's food needs, it has greatly increased food security. Local production has been key to increasing the availability of fresh vegetables and tubers, which are vital sources of vitamins, minerals and carbohydrates.

Localized productions has also made cities much more independent in food supply. As of March 1998, it was estimated that 50% of national vegetable production is grown in urban areas. This has meant that urban residents are now eating more fresh vegetables than before 1989, when the usual diet was beans, rice and meat.

The gardens also bring environmental benefits. Many empty lots, which had previously been informal garbage dumps are now beautiful gardens that provide food to local communities, multiply urban biodiversity, improving neighborhood aesthetics and health. But the gardens do face difficulties. There is a lack of open land, especially in the oldest, most heavily populated areas of Havana. There is not enough good topsoil and many urban soils have been degraded and contaminated. Residues from garbage dumps still plague some lots. Soil improvement is not easy either as there is a shortage of manure and organic matter for soil amendments. Water is in short supply, and irrigation equipment is limited. There are problems with pests and disease, and occasional theft.

These problems are being addressed with imagination, creativity and a strong commitment to sustainable gardening methods. Extension workers promote healthy gardens by focusing on the prevention of many problems. Composting and green manures are encouraged for increasing soil organic matter. Locally produced biological fertilizers are used if fertility is still low. Biodiversity and companion planting are encouraged for pest and disease prevention, and in the case of attacks, biological controls are promoted. Well and water pumps are increasingly used to tap groundwater.

Some have predicted that with the easing up of the food crisis Cuban's urban gardens would fade away. But just the opposite has been true. Havana's farms and gardens are steadily increasing, both in size and number, but most importantly in quality. They have had a visible impact on the food security of the city and in improving the Cuban diet. Given the commitment to food security, real access to public resources, and to increasing community control, it looks like these gardens will be part of Havana's landscape for a long time to come.