

Promoting Access to Food in Contagem, Brazil

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The municipality of Contagem in the State of Minas Gerais, despite being known as an industrial centre, has an enormous potential to develop urban agriculture. The current administration recognises this, and supports the development of agriculture as an important strategy for consolidating its Municipal Food and Nutritional Security Policy.

Since the 1950s Contagem has developed into one of the cities in Brazil with the largest number of industries. Several neighbourhoods grew in an unorganised way around these industries, due to the influx of migrants looking for jobs and better living conditions. Contagem is an amazing mosaic of landscapes, with densely occupied industrial areas, residential neighbourhoods, and “urban vacuums”: remnant areas and formerly rural lands which still contain pastures occupied by cattle, horses, goats and extensive marsh areas. To build a more sustainable city, it is important to recover and strengthen urban and family agriculture in the municipality.

Community gardens developed on public and private institutional areas allow people living in conditions of food insecurity to produce and access healthy food. Moreover, they contribute to building strong cities and to local development. One of the successful experiences in Contagem is the community garden of the Support Centre (*Horta Comuni-*

tária da Casa de Apoio). This community garden is part of the Urban and Family Agriculture Support Programme, run by the Coordination Office of Food and Nutritional Security and Supply (CSANA), which is part of the Municipal Secretariat of Social Development of the municipality of Contagem.

The Urban and Family Agriculture Support Programme was supported by RUAf through its Cities Farming for the Future Programme in 2007-2008. This project aimed at “improving the conditions of families living with food and nutritional insecurity and social risks, through the implementation of a collective space for the production of fruits, vegetables and inputs using agro-ecological methods, through participatory management and community organisation.

Lessons learned

Approximately a year and a half after the start of the community garden project, the results are quite visible. Its success demonstrates that collaboration between public authorities and civil society organisations in promoting social inclusion is important in local development.

Culture of participation

At the Support Centre a “garden group” has been set up, consisting of twelve organised families. The diverse group is made up of young and elderly people (mostly women), who are involved in social programmes. In regular meetings, planning, crop management and overall administration are discussed and a culture of participation is created that extends to other community, decision-making and training

The Support Center has agro-ecological production areas as well as learning and training areas

Photo: Alain Santandreu





Horta Comunitária da Casa de Apoio – community garden part of the Urban and Family Agriculture Support Programme
Photo: Alain Santandreu

forums. In this way, the experience with agriculture encourages a change in the way that participants perceive the place they live in, both individually and collectively, and how they view possible changes.

The community garden at the Support Center has agro-ecological production areas, as well as a learning and training area. Participating farmers share the things that they learn with other families in the region. They have created a network through which they can exchange knowledge and experiences, but also roots, seeds and other resources. Already 30 other families have started their own little family gardens with the help of this network. Moreover, a large proportion of the residents of Nova Contagem came from the countryside with local agricultural knowledge that can be enhanced and shared through urban agriculture. This activity is thus an important strategy for integration and survival in the city, as well as for reducing social vulnerability.

Partnerships

The community garden collaborates with the Members of the *Pastoral da Criança*, a social action organisation of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, which is very active at the local level, act as facilitators and encourage the population to participate in activities that promote health and food security. Because they are trusted in the community, they have a positive influence on decision-making. The RUAf project was developed with the “Support Center for Children in Need of Contagem”, a civil society organisation which, among other activities, supports the Community Kitchen in Nova Contagem, one of the regions with the highest rates of poverty, social vulnerability and food insecurity within the municipality.

Healthier diets and increased income

Through weekly visits to the community garden, technical follow-up is carried out by the CSANA team with the support of EMATER¹, which is part of the agreement with the municipality of Contagem. During these visits, the garden group meets, exchanges experiences, discusses and plans activities, and undertakes joint agricultural activities. Everything

produced by the garden is shared by the participants and the surplus is sold, which generates a small fund used for daily expenses.

Other garden groups in the city are also looking at this opportunity to generate direct revenues, which allows families to save on food purchases and consume healthier products. Farmers also frequently claim that participating in agricultural activities has a therapeutic effect, not only because of the contact with the land and the plants, but also because of collective practices.

Optimising the use of local resources

The urban gardens in Contagem are located on empty areas and lots that, if they were to remain vacant, would become disposal sites for waste and debris, and places where disease vectors, such as rats and insects, can freely reproduce. The Support Centre encourages community members to change their habits with respect to waste management, and, although still present to some extent in the gardens, there is much less waste than before.

Organic waste from the Community Kitchen in Nova Contagem, which serves around 300 people per day, is collected daily and transformed into a high-quality fertiliser through composting. In exchange, the group offers the kitchen a portion of the produce, creating a cycle that integrates the production of healthy food, waste reduction and resource optimisation.

Through the introduction of new species and varieties in the gardens, the former waste dumps are now showing increased biodiversity. One of the challenges of the gardens is the high cost of clean water. Therefore, rooftop rainwater collection facilities were installed, with a storage capacity of 20,000 litres. Although not enough for all the crops, the water is used in the gardens during the dry season. It also helps to reduce costs, as well as minimise the impact of floods during the rainy season.

Conclusion

The Support Centre’s initiatives are part of the Municipal Food and Nutritional Security Policy of Contagem, and contribute, together with other initiatives in the city, to creating a sustainable and resistant city.

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Notes

1) Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Company of the State of Minas Gerais.

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