

# Urban Agriculture in El Alto: An experience of revitalisation

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**The structural food crisis in the city of El Alto has had an especially negative impact on the lives of the poorest families. Urban agriculture is one of the alternative strategies initiated to improve their food security, but also to enhance the social inclusion of the women involved, who have more time available than the men and who can develop additional skills through this activity.**

El Alto is a city founded in the 1960s on the outskirts of La Paz. It has 960,000 inhabitants, 80 percent of whom are of Aymara origin, and close to 60 percent of whom are women. The annual population growth rate is 8.2 percent. This city is located on the Bolivian altiplano (high plateau) at 4,000 metres above sea level. The average temperature is 8.8 degrees Celsius and the city's economy is primarily based on informal commerce and cheap labour.

El Alto is the poorest city in Bolivia, as nearly 70 percent of the population lives on less than US\$1 per day (Iriarte, 2007). It is estimated that 80 percent of the residents of this city live in

low-income settlements, and 35 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty (National Statistics Institute, 2006). This urban poverty is generally accompanied by a lack of water, limited and low-quality food and housing, restricted educational opportunities and dangerous, low-paying jobs.

## The structural crisis

Most of the residents of El Alto suffer from the consequences of what one could call a structural crisis. This crisis is caused by migration to El Alto and subsequent high pressure on the land and overexploitation of the soil, high levels of unemployment, precarious housing and a high level of malnutrition and the lack of governmental support to tackle these problems. In recent years, production of tubers and quinoa, the main crops of the altiplano, has fallen drastically in this region. The daily diet of the population is based mainly on carbohydrates from the potato and its derivatives and other tubers. The consumption of proteins, vitamins and minerals is extremely low.

During the 2000 and 2003 crisis and demonstrations, El Alto was seriously blocked by government, which generated a chronic shortage of food and a resulting indiscriminate rise in food prices. Urban gardening proved to be the only source of food for the inhabitants of El Alto.

## Food security and social inclusion

The Comunidad y Acción foundation, together with a group of young women, many of whom are abandoned and/or unemployed mothers, has sought alternative solutions to the problem of malnutrition and seeking alternatives to overcome the crisis. Together with the municipality of El Alto and FAO, 37 family micro-gardens<sup>(2)</sup> in different districts of the city of El Alto were established in 2008, particularly in the most remote and marginal districts of the city where there is no potable water service. The aim of this project is to address food security, while at the same time facilitating social inclusion of the participants.

The micro-gardens have a surface area of 25.6 m<sup>2</sup> and are intended to produce food for household consumption. Each of the family micro-gardens directly benefits an average of 5 people, or 185 in total. However, poverty forces most families to share their household with grandparents, in-laws, nephews and nieces, brothers and sisters, etc., which on average represents 5 additional people per household. Some of the crops that have been

*Urban agriculture improves food security and enhances social inclusion of women* Photo: Alain Santandreu





Both crops and small livestock (Guinea pig) is produced under cover  
Photo: Alain Santandreu

introduced into the daily diets of these people are: Swiss chard (acelga), lettuce (4 varieties), radishes, beets, green beans, cucumbers, paprika, pepper, tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, leeks, tomatoes, zucchini, turnips, basil, and the Andean aromatic plants: huacataya and quirquiña. All of these are produced without the use of agro-chemicals.

The production and consumption of this produce has also generated significant economic benefits, because the money these households used to spend on purchasing vegetables can now be used to buy meat, eggs, milk and bread, which they previously could only eat on very special occasions.

This more diversified diet has significantly enhanced people's nutrition, especially that of children, which translates into better performance in school and a significant reduction in disease. The 37 women responsible for the gardens enjoy their work and the health benefits of gardening. Before starting the micro-gardens, these women were constantly looking for temporary work, like selling candy or cigarettes, washing clothes, working as maids, or providing cheap labour. Their empowerment has also led in many families to better relationships, both between spouses and between parents and children.

The micro-gardens have further initiated a process of social interaction among neighbours, some of whom also want to learn how to grow the vegetables.

### Communities of dialogue

There is no democracy without citizenship. The women responsible for the micro-gardens also participate, on a weekly basis, in a process of political education in the *communities of dialogue* <sup>(3)</sup>. These communities aim to facilitate education and the development of improved social and human relations. These communities also address environmental and poverty issues and seek to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility toward one's own municipality as well as the environment in general. In this context, the creation and maintenance of micro-gardens is a reflection of individual responsibility.

As there is a high demand for the micro-gardens, the selection of people to manage them is important, and priority is given to unemployed women with children, but also to those who have the necessary technical skills (those who attended the micro-gardening course). The micro-gardens are built jointly. The foundation provides technical advice, and the

families provide the labour and the remaining materials (disposable PET containers, tin cans, etc.). The women also participate actively in the process of political education in the context of the communities of dialogue.

### High demand

*Poverty and food insecurity are the main reasons for the rapid growth of urban agriculture in El Alto. Women micro-gardeners prioritise their children's food security: "In 2003, there were no vegetables, and prices were sky high. We don't want to go through that delicate and anguishing situation again."*

*"With the lack of jobs and high inflation, my micro-garden is like a blessing from God."*

*"The family micro-gardens, where we produce quality, fresh vegetables, have managed to balance and improve our diet."*

*"Our parents' wages are low and the micro-garden helps to balance our family's nutrition, especially for the kids."*

*"Now my children eat vegetables in their soup. Even though we don't always have meat, we have vegetables: chuño <sup>(4)</sup>, potatoes, etc."*

*"Now I can use the vegetable budget to buy other primary food items."*

*This information is based on two interviews conducted with Purnima by IWMI staff on 24/4/08 and 26/4/08.*

### Conclusions

The family micro-gardens have proven to be an effective solution to the problem of structural food insecurity, which the poor women of El Alto live with every day. At the same time, they are a window of hope. By using the gardens also as spaces for education, the programme helps the women of El Alto become more empowered in their families, neighbourhoods and wider public and social settings.

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#### Notes

- 1) Surcufundio: Refers to the furrows that today the indigenous people leave as an inheritance to their children.
- 2) The Municipality of El Alto and FAO started implementing family micro-gardens already in 2003 (also see UAM no. 19), and since that time 400 gardens have already been created.
- 3) A methodology of community participation, capacity-building and empowerment implemented by the Fundación Comunidad y Axión.
- 4) Dehydrated potato

#### Reference

Iriarte, Gregorio, *Análisis crítico de la realidad*, 17th Edition, Editorial Quipus, Cochabamba, 2007.