

Empowering Local Initiatives: building food sovereignty from the social tissue

Background

Colombia has been immersed in a civil war for the past 60 years. Most deeply affecting rural areas, the conflict – and the entwined instability of narcotic trafficking, new free trade agreements, and the land grabbing and monocultures set by agribusiness – has impoverished rural peasants' life and has increasingly displaced peasant communities to the cities. Bogotá is a city of approximately 10 million people; within it, the locality of San Cristobal, an old district in the mountainous southeast corner of the city, is home to ¼ million people, many of whom are displaced rural families. These peasant families are challenged by the lack of basic public services—water, electricity, and affordable transportation— and the fact that their urban environment does not allow them to use their traditional knowledge of working the land. Alongside immense poverty, unemployment, homelessness, social insecurity, and exorbitant food prices, the rate of food insecurity in San Cristobal is a growing concern and a harsh reality.

Currently, there are no active community gardens in San Cristobal. In 2010, recognizing the level of food insecurity in this locality, Bogota invested in a project – Mesa de Agricultura Urbana (MAU) – to promote urban agriculture in all localities of the city. Unfortunately, yet not surprisingly, the interest and promises of public institutions quickly became empty welfare projects with politically manipulative intentions that left the project with little lasting support. San Cristobal has the only MAU that is still active, yet the 100 or so member group is composed mostly of elderly, displaced peasants who lack resources and strong bonds with the rest of the community, especially with the younger generations. Although these elders have retained knowledge of agricultural practices, many of the young community members are disconnected from their family's background – in part because their past is associated with violence and trauma and in part because they prefer to adapt to the city context. The ancestral knowledge of the land is consequently being gradually forgotten and lost. Colombia is an agricultural country and the fact that younger generations are minimally relating to the land is a worrying issue for the country's future.

Project Overview

We have been in contact with the community members in San Cristobal, specifically with the MAU, which owns three vacant lots of 100 square meters each. One of these lots has been granted to our disposal, and we want to transform this space into a community garden. During a period of ten weeks, we will prepare the land for planting, purchase organic seeds from the local market, and plant legumes, grains, and tubers, all plants desired by members of the community. We will also design and construct both compost and simple rainwater harvesting systems. The garden will be a space for sharing and meeting of community members, especially a place where intergenerational interactions can occur. To draw the attention and encourage the participation of people of the locality, we will offer community meals at the garden and free workshops from the José Celestino Mutis Botanical Garden, workshops that will focus on technical information about urban agriculture. We will encourage young adolescents to participate, share, and learn from the work being done in the garden. We have already contacted two local schools which have allowed us to announce in their classrooms the existence of the community garden and the upcoming activities. We look forward to strengthening the connection with these schools.

By activating the community garden and inviting the elder and younger generations to participate and work with us, we will open a space and an opportunity for intergenerational exchange of agricultural knowledge, contributing to a generational transfer of ancestral traditions. The community garden will not only provide a healthy food supply for a population that is currently living under food insecurity and

nutritional deficiencies, but also build a food sovereignty awareness independent from the market intermediaries. The community garden will be a space where elderly people can spend their time gardening and provide a constant alternative to the violent social scene for the unemployed youth.

The members of the MAU have already expressed their support with building of the community garden and sharing traditional agricultural knowledge with younger generations. In addition to their help, we know of the existence of a small cooperative in the community, that in association with the MAU, have started growing vegetables and legumes for their own consumption in their home gardens. Both the MAU and the cooperative members are committed to work the vacant lot with us and continue taking care of the land once we leave. We think it is of utmost importance to empower both the MAU and the cooperative as local initiatives that strive for food sovereignty through the weaving of the community members' traditional knowledge. The MAU has a standing committee on ancestral knowledge and intergenerational pass down which has been our main point of engagement with them thus far. Potentially, with the energy invested in the community garden as a social axis and the constructions of the connections with younger generations, the MAU and the cooperative will be able to transfer generational information more effectively. In a country like Colombia, where peacebuilding is essential to overcome the violent context and where processes of reconciliation are currently dealt with in international settings, to empower local initiatives like the MAU and the cooperative is to activate the role that community members have in building peace from the grassroots level.

In our studies of Human Ecology at College of the Atlantic, both of us have taken classes related to agroecology, gardens and greenhouses, botany, food systems, and food justice as well as independent studies that have solidified our understanding of the peasants' condition in Colombia. Maria, a gardener at our college campus, has the knowledge and experience to start an organic garden. Maytik has a strong background in botany, particularly with pollinator species within cities, which is essential knowledge when deciding what plants to grow in an urban setting. Both of us are committed to furthering our knowledge by taking a composting and waste management class offered in Spring. This class will complement our designs of the energy efficient and sustainable compost and rainwater harvesting system for the community garden. We have the support of two close friends who will volunteer their time in developing the project and who have been the link between us and the community members of San Cristobal.

Project Outreach

Constructing a community garden in San Cristobal will have long-term outcomes. The cooperative has said that once the garden is up and running by its own members, it will encourage the launch of a trade system implementing principles of a resilient local economy. They also have plans for opening their own seed bank in collaboration with the peasant markets that have been developed in nearby localities. We hope that by strengthening the relationship with local schools, children's educational programs will include urban agriculture and botany. The future plans also include an activity to design with the youth participants a mural that will represent their views on urban agriculture and that will last as a communal memory and as an artistic asset for San Cristobal. Furthermore, one of the volunteers has expressed interest in video recording the project, and she would like to leave with the MAU a promotional video about the community garden and future projects as part of their institutional memory. We are confident that once the MAU sees their productive potential, they will call others to join and use these records to search for more private or independent support to carry out new endeavors. And, ultimately, raising awareness about the power, magic, and benefits of working the land with care will save our country's agricultural traditions from being lost with the passing of time.