

# Growing better Cities

URBAN AGRICULTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## A City Hooked on Urban Farming

*Rosario, Argentina, embraced vegetable gardens as a way to pull through an economic crisis. It now leads the way among cities in the promotion of urban agriculture.*

Providing the necessities for her family has always been a challenge for Vilma Cala, a single parent of four children in Rosario, Argentina. Her income from work as a domestic and the produce from a vegetable garden allowed her to put enough food on the table, but that was before the economic crisis that rocked the country in late 2001.

The January 2002 devaluation drove the peso down to one-third of its value, and Cala, to a critical point. "I had to go to a soup kitchen and ask for food. It was terrible, having to depend on others. It really hurt, but I did it," she says. "If you don't have food to eat, you don't have anything at all."

Now Cala tends a large garden in a field criss-crossed by inactive power lines. The garden produces enough for Cala to sell at a market that the municipality of Rosario created especially for urban farmers. She also belongs to a group of women that makes cosmetic products from natural ingredients such as nettle, aloe, and burdock, grown in their gardens. Cala's earnings from these activities, combined with additional income earned by cleaning houses and gardening, has enabled her to regain some ground in providing for her family.

Cala has benefited from a program that the municipality of Rosario developed, using the results of research supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and UN-HABITAT's Urban Management Program (UMP), which coordinated the project. In just five years, the program has grown from a pilot into a prize-winning, citywide showpiece and a model of how municipal governments can integrate and promote urban agriculture.



IDRC: Federico Gutierrez

**Urban agriculture provides a livelihood for Vilma Cala, a mother of four children.**

Launched in early 2002, Rosario's Programa de Agricultura Urbana (PAU — urban agriculture program) was meant to supplement the city's food donation programs to the poor. Destitution in Argentina had been growing since the military assumed power in 1976, says Pedro Pavicich, Rosario's Secretary of Social Promotion. Job losses and poverty increased under the extensive privatization and deregulation programs implemented by President Carlos Menem in the 1990s. Rosario, a city of one million 300 kilometres northwest of Buenos Aires, is still home to some 136 000 squatters living in 91 communities and it continues to attract migrants from rural areas, Pavicich says. The municipality teamed up with a local nongovernmental organization, the Centro de Estudios de Producciones Agroecológicas (CEPAR — centre for the study of agroecological production) and a national program, Pro Huerta, which supports family



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**Mirta Palese works half time, processing vegetables grown in Rosario.**

gardens. The plan was to supply 20 groups with gardening tools, materials, and seeds; develop a methodology; and then, slowly extend the program throughout the city.

Meanwhile the outcry of anguished Argentines echoed throughout the country in demonstrations and several mass raids on supermarkets, including two in Rosario. Hundreds of residents protested daily in front of Rosario's municipal, state, and federal government buildings, demanding work or assistance. The depth of people's need forced the PAU into overdrive; it began handing out more and more materials to get people started on urban farming. More than 100 people would attend the three weekly classes on organic farming. They in turn would pass on these lessons to their neighbours.

"We were overwhelmed," says Antonio Lattuca, the program's coordinator. Urban agriculture channeled people's desperation and gave them hope. "You plant and the week after you see something starting to grow."

Soon, there were more than 800 gardening groups throughout the city. A national assistance program, Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar Desocupados (unemployed heads of household plan), helped convert people to urban farming. Administered by local governments, the Plan paid 150 pesos monthly (US\$50) to participants on the condition that they engage in some form of labour, community work, employment training, or schooling. Many of those who signed up chose to engage in urban agriculture. The Plan proved a blessing for urban farmers, Lattuca explains, as it helped them scrape through the first months before their gardens started to produce.

The IDRC-supported research project came at a propitious time, helping Rosario move from crisis management to laying the foundation for a long-term urban agriculture strategy. IDRC and UN-HABITAT's UMP wanted to develop methodologies and instruments to integrate urban agriculture into urban planning. The research, in which Cienfuegos, Cuba, and Governador Valadares, Brazil, also

participated, involved city consultations and studies to develop practices, tools, policies, and strategies for integrating urban agriculture into land-use planning.

From May 2002 to April 2003, the Centro de Estudios del Ambiente Humano (CEAH — human environments studies centre) at the National University of Rosario, CEPAR, and several municipal departments — such as urban planning and property registry — collaborated to analyze the available vacant land in the city. They used aerial photography, databases from the land registry, and information provided by urban farmers in workshops.

This exercise allowed the municipality to address the issue of people occupying vacant land without permission, a practice that had emerged during the economic crisis. The practice, commonly referred to as peaceful usurpation, was condoned by the PAU, which put it at odds with other city departments.

Realizing that there was no communication between municipal actors, the project partners convened an inter-departmental workshop, during which synergy slowly emerged among the apparently conflicting interests. The Servicio Público de la Vivienda (SPV — public housing service), for example, whose mandate was to prevent squatters from permanently settling on property intended for future construction, began to see the advantage of formally ceding the land for a limited time to gardeners who tend it, explains Laura Bracalenti, a CEAH architect.

There were other advantages to loaning the land. In preparing it for cultivation, the gardeners painstakingly rid the property of debris and weeds. "If you paid a company to do this, it would cost a lot," says Bracalenti.

The gardeners were also interested in reaching an agreement. Their work is their investment and they did not want to be kicked off the land unexpectedly. Input from all concerned signaled to the project partners that the city needed a new regulation to establish a quick and efficient process to formalize the temporary cession of property for urban agriculture. The regulation, which the mayor approved in September 2004, also put the PAU in charge of the information bank that controls the use of vacant land for farming.

## A livelihood from urban farming

As the most acute phase of the crisis passed, some people abandoned their gardens. The program was left with 600 committed groups and its original objective of transforming urban farming into a source of employment and a way to reduce poverty in Rosario. The PAU determined that gardeners should be able to earn 785 pesos a month (US\$260) — the poverty line — through their urban agriculture activities.

It was clear that to reach this goal the gardeners needed to produce more, add value to their products, and sell

more. In 2003, the PAU created seven weekly markets in different parts of Rosario. It provides the markets' identifying yellow canopies, red and white chequered tablecloths, tables, and wide shallow wicker baskets. It also coordinates transporting the produce from gardens to markets.

Behind each bountiful table is a personal story of dire economic necessity, struggle, and hope. Raquel Perez, for example, earns 100 to 120 pesos a week from sales at two markets. She planted her garden five years ago. No one will hire her at age 55, she says. When her husband, whose work is unsteady, tried to discourage her from gardening on the grounds that she was exposing herself to too much sun, she started to charge him for what they ate and showed him the total after two months. She has taken a liking to her garden. "It's my second home," she says.

Gabriel Herredia earns 50 to 80 pesos on market day. He is part of a group of four seniors who tend a plot on land ceded by the SPV. At 64, he is waiting for his 400-peso monthly pension to kick in. Meanwhile, gardening and the unemployed head of household plan are his and his wife's only sources of income. He plans to keep on gardening "as long as he is able," even when he does receive his pension.

The full range of products from gardens and some cottage industries can be seen at each of the markets. At the Saturday market in the city centre, overlooking the Paraná river, there are even bread, cookies, and jams. Maria Casano is selling jars of marmalades, pickled vegetables, sauces, syrups, and preserved fruit made by her cooperative. She says the group, which sells its products in several stores, buys 30% of its ingredients from the city's urban gardeners.



IDRC: Federico Gutierrez

**Antonia Lattuca, PAU coordinator, waits for Gabriel Perez to prepare his produce for the next day's market.**

The natural cosmetic products Vilma Cala helps to make are there too. They are on display at every market under the brand name Rosario Natural. The brand design, product labels, and tabletop stands were developed with funding from Italy's International Institute for Economic Cooperation.

Cala is about to transfer the containers of tinctures and creams from the small home she shares with her children and her mother, to a factory the PAU built for the 12 people who produce the beauty products. The factory occupies one side of a small, refurbished warehouse on the riverfront. Once the property of a now defunct state railroad company, the seven-room installation, which is awaiting certification, will eventually accommodate 30 cosmetic producers who will use their own plants and buy some from other urban gardeners.

In a vegetable-processing room at the other end of the building, part-time workers manually chop vegetables and put them through food processors. Each day they prepare 60 to 80 platters of pre-cut and mixed ingredients for favourite Argentinean salads, soups, and pies. The factory has the capacity to produce 2 000 trays a week. The PAU is looking to expand the supply of vegetables from urban farmers to boost sales at the markets and develop new distribution points.

## Gardening landscapes

Because of the demand for their product, the city's farmers have increased production and the PAU has expanded its outreach and support. Through the IDRC-supported research, it identified a significant amount of land unsuitable for building, but not for growing food. These large plots of land alongside roads, railroads, and streams, have become choice properties that PAU recommends to gardeners because they can be farmed indefinitely (once permission is ceded). And as gardeners have experienced problems obtaining water, the PAU has begun digging wells and supplying water pumps.

Another innovation emerged when the only space available for one community interested in gardening was the nearby natural reserve, Bosque de los Constituyentes. The PAU approached the municipal Parks and Walkways department for permission to farm in a field within the reserve's limits. The department accepted, on condition that the gardens be attractive. Thus, the idea of creating garden parks was born.

The Bosque de los Constituyentes garden park is still in the planning stages. However, IDRC's support is helping to bring the concept to fruition in Molino Blanco, one of six neighbourhoods where the SPV is implementing a program funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, to relocate families from unsafe areas and extend services, such as waste removal, to all residents. A garden park is particularly appropriate for the southern neighbourhood of Molino Blanco because it is the home of 10 urban farming

groups supported by the PAU and because there are tracts of land along a stream that are unsuitable for housing.

The Minimum Cost Housing Group at Canada's McGill University chose to include the Molino Blanco project in an IDRC-supported research effort along with projects in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Kampala, Uganda. The objective of the research, which is also funded by McGill University and UN-HABITAT's UMP, is to find ways of integrating agriculture into the development or improvement of low-income residential districts in developing-country settings.

Both SPV and PAU consulted extensively with residents. Those who had to relocate chose, themselves, where they would go. The gardeners also participated in the design of the garden park, together with architects from Rosario's CEAH and landscape designers.

The municipality broke ground to create the Molino Blanco garden park in mid-March 2006. At the launch, Pedro Pavicich announced that the garden park would include areas for class visits, recreational paths, and a soccer field. The PAU demonstrated the small tractor and multiple-use plough it intends to use in the garden parks. PAU bought the equipment with US\$30 000 in prize money from the 2004 Dubai Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment, one of several prizes it has received.

Another garden park is planned in the La Tablada neighbourhood, along the highway heading to Buenos Aires. Part of the municipal planning department's large development program, it stretches 17 kilometres along the riverfront. The municipality is appropriating the land from the port authority because Rosario is no longer a commercial port.

The Planning Department's commitment to making the La Tablada garden park a reality and the SPV's efforts in Molino Blanco demonstrate what can be achieved when local governments support and promote urban agriculture. With this level of cooperation, the PAU program has a fighting chance of helping its participants cross the poverty line. "The potential is there to beat poverty," says program coordinator Antonio Lattuca. "A lot of money is invested in the fight against poverty, but not always effectively. Urban agriculture is the way forward."

*This case study was written by Louise Guénette of IDRC's Communications Division.*

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