

Urban Agroecology Movement (MUDA) Changes the Brazilian Metropolis

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Photo by Pops Lopes

MUDA means change / plant seedlings. It is the Portuguese acronym for Urban Agroecology Movement, a network promoting agroecology in Sao Paulo. With 21 million people, Sao Paulo is the largest city of the global South and the most crowded metropolitan region of the Western hemisphere. MUDA supports many local projects and brings together farmers, volunteers and communities.

Throughout the world, for centuries, we have seen an increasing flow of migration from agricultural areas to cities. As a result, we can now see a gradual distancing of urban dwellers from the rural space and its cycles governed by nature. In Brazil, a country of immense biodiversity, this distancing has social and environmental consequences, unbalancing the relationship between people and natural resources, threatening the preservation of our biomes and bringing the loss of peoples' culture. It is accompanied by increasing economic inequality.

Four fifths of Brazil's population has congregated in its cities, mostly following the logic of capital. This logic focuses on technologies that disregard human relationships, and weakens the power of its inhabitants to meet their basic needs without the omnipresent and mandatory use of money.

Cities are subjected to the interests of the real estate market, which, with its strong relations with public power through the financing political campaigns, influences government

policies and reproduces the logic of the segregation of social classes. Even with many vacant buildings and lots in central areas, poorer dwellers are pushed to the periphery, finding clandestine occupations and making their homes in slums without adequate infrastructure. Areas with natural water springs and preserved vegetation, important for the regional environmental balance, end up being invaded and degraded in the process.

In São Paulo, this scenario generates social and environmental conflicts that hinder conviviality among its inhabitants as they search for a reasonable quality of life. The population, largely estranged from its agricultural background, relies on a food industry that provides low nutritional items. Traditional healing practices have been replaced by the logic of large pharmaceutical companies. The same logic of economic dependence applies to housing, clothing, and cleaning products.

Urban agriculture or urban agroecology?

Producing food in urban and peri-urban spaces offers possibilities to break with this dependence, exclusion and lack of social interaction. Using vacant or under-occupied city spaces for cultivation allows for reconnecting the rural, natural universe with the typical life of urban environments. Urban agriculture in São Paulo generates survival options for the poorest population. But it also meets the desire of a growing number of people in search of more solidarity and a healthier, sustainable lifestyle.

There are many forms of cultivation in the city with multiple purposes. A private garden, tended by salaried labour is very different from a small public space cultivated by a group. The former commercialises its crop and mostly cultivates

Agroecology in São Paulo

- The municipality of São Paulo has a network of about 400 farms (see [interactive map](#)) dedicated to the production of local food. Not all of them cultivate agroecologically, but an increasing number is in the process of conversion and a network of organisations (MUDA-SP partners) assists in this process. Many of these farms are located in APAs (Environmental Protection Areas) and help to preserve water springs and forests. COOPERAPAS is a cooperative located in APAs BORORÉ- COLONIA and CAPIVARI-MONOS, at the southern end of the municipality. This cooperative is organically certified through a Participatory Guarantee System. It therefore incorporates two more agroecological practices: trust between farmers and consumers; and the autonomy of producers in relation to the commercial market where certification is acquired through a certification company.
- The Sister Albert settlement is an example of agroecological farming in the northern part of the municipality of São Paulo. It resulted from the struggle of rural workers for access to land and reveals that agrarian reform is feasible even in regions close to large cities. The settlement

commercialises agroecologically-produced food by direct sales to solidarity consumption groups.

- Indigenous villages still exist within the perimeter of São Paulo, producing agroecologically, mainly for subsistence, but also as a way of recovering and maintaining their culture.
- A set of “activist” gardens are maintained by groups with more pedagogical and militant goals for social transformations than for large scale cultivation of food. They cultivate public places, some quite symbolic, such as the Horta do Ciclista, in Av. Paulista, the city’s main avenue, attracting attention to the agrifood cause and sensitising Paulistanos to reflect on their food and way of life. It is the seed of agroecology being cultivated in people’s hearts at the centre of the megalopolis.

MUDA-SP’s mission is to support these initiatives and promote links between them and the population, strengthening the existence of agroecology in the municipality. One way to do so is on the internet, where the network maintains a website that offers a map showing where the agroecological gardens are.



Photo by Pops Lopes

non-native species while the latter may be rescuing ancestral knowledge, recovering native species long neglected by the market, and fostering relationships with each other. The latter also fosters a relationship with nature, transcending the productive logic based on the financial sector.

The percentage of Paulistanos involved in agricultural cultivation is still very limited but urban agroecology emerges as a radical proposal of social transformation. It distances itself from the simple practices of cultivation in urban spaces that define urban agriculture, and moves towards the development of deeper relations with the earth and more human solidarity. The cultivation of food in urban spaces becomes a tool for a broader ideal: to awaken the population of cities in relation to what they eat and how they live.

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