

# Surviving on little land

women's struggle in town and country

*Socioeconomic policies implemented in recent decades in Argentina have led to division of land into small plots (minifundización) and expanding poverty belts around the big cities. Growing food in small gardens is seen as one way to help the poor feed their families. Daniel Cáceres and Miryam Arbomo present two case examples - one urban and one rural - from Córdoba Province in central Argentina.*

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**M**odernisation of agriculture and the promise of work in the cities caused a flow of rural emigration. This led to shortage of labour in rural areas for the strenuous manual work needed in farming (Ferrer 1994). Crop production per farm decreased, while the vulnerability of the farms and the dependence of rural families on climatic vagaries increased (Cáceres 1993). At the same time, the indigenous knowledge created and reproduced over generations is being lost.

Meanwhile, in and around big cities like Córdoba, immigrants with different cultural and farming backgrounds are living at close quarters. Some brought along their techniques of gardening and raising of chickens and other animals (Petri 1994). However, other immigrants - mainly women - started working as domestic help for families of urban origin, and could not reproduce their rural practices because farming conflicted with the norms of their host families. Still others among the poor are people of urban origin with little or no farming experience.

## Tiny rural gardens

In Copacabana, 150 km northwest of Córdoba, is a small farming community with about 100 families. The climate is temperate and dry (400-500 mm rain during the summer). Here, the "richer" farmers raise goats and some grow maize and pumpkins in small farms. The poorest ones, who have no land for such activities, do handicrafts, such as making baskets from the leaves of the local palm tree *Thrinx campetris*.

Since 1989, the Faculty of Agronomy in Copacabana, together with other institutions, is implementing a rural development program. One of the projects focuses on homegardens to improve family diet and food security. The gardens are rarely bigger than 25 m<sup>2</sup>. Very often, boxes or empty tins serve as containers. This type

of cultivation may seem strange in a rural area where there is more space than in cities. However, the gardens are small because of the poor conditions for production: poor soils, lack of water, scarcity of

tools and need for barriers to keep out animals. Farming is done by hand, tools are simple and use of external inputs is low: only some seeds. The gardens are worked mainly in summer, for three reasons:



Photo: Daniel Cáceres

*Members of poor rural families have to divide their time between gardening to improve family diet and cash-generating activities such as basket weaving.*

- climatic factors: in the dry season, harvests are uncertain
- pest avoidance: winter can be very dry and gardens would attract hungry pests such as ants, birds, rabbits and some domestic animals
- cultural reasons: eating habits give priority to certain foods in summer (eg. maize, pumpkin, potato, tomato) and others in winter.

### Time is tight

Women play an important role in sowing, maintaining and harvesting gardens. They take the main decisions, eg. when and how much to sow. Men and male youths rarely help, except with the hard work of building fences and breaking the soil.

It is difficult for the women to find enough time to do the work well. Only after they have fulfilled their culturally assigned role in the home (childcare, cooking, fetching water and fuel, etc) can they do productive work, including basket weaving. Thus, gardening must be fitted into a tight schedule with other competing activities, both domestic and productive. The time a woman can devote to gardening determines the output, which fluctuates greatly. If, for example, a family problem arises which demands much time or money, the amount which can be invested in the garden decreases.

### Larger urban gardens

With 600,000 inhabitants, Córdoba is the second largest city in Argentina. Nearly 40% of the people live in miserable conditions in poor urban districts and periurban slums. Here, the *Agroecología Urbana* project of the nongovernmental organisation CECOPAL involves environmental education oriented to growing nonpolluted food and improving the urban habitat by reclaiming wasteland and creating green spaces.

The urban gardens are somewhat bigger than the rural ones and can produce year-round (although with production peaks in autumn and spring) because regulations concerning water use in the city are not very strict. Here, as in the rural gardens, the technology is simple but there is a greater diversity of species, including various fruit trees and aromatic plants. Multiple cropping, organic farming and low-external-input practices are widespread.

In rural Copacabana, each family has its own garden. In the city, however, community gardens are promoted for three main reasons:

- land is scarce in the city and community gardens offer the only space to grow some food;

- wasteland reclamation requires the organised action of several families;
- in the city there are better possibilities to meet, because distances are shorter and transport facilities are better than in rural areas.

### Still less time

Also here, women are the main actors. And here too, their domestic duties, but also the necessity to have a paid job outside the home so as to make ends meet, limit the time they can give to gardening. Nevertheless, group activities in reclaiming waste-disposal sites, planting trees and sowing vegetables have improved both food production and the urban habitat.

A study made by CECOPAL concluded that, by gardening, urban families save as much as 25% of their food expenditures. When they have some surplus vegetables, many families sell or barter them in the neighbourhood (eg. selling to families of women hired as domestic help, or bartering vegetables for beef from the local butcher). Moreover, they can now include in their diet some vegetables considered "luxurious" because of their market price.

The meetings of the gardening groups generate a spirit of participation, and the women share experiences and problems also on other matters than the formal aims of the group. This has stimulated women to get involved in other community activities and organisations (eg. housing commission, school association, community purchase of foods). In some quarters, women get together to talk about gender issues like female sexuality, relations within the family and roles of different family members.



*Greater involvement of men in homegardening, which is now mainly women's work, would be a step toward more equitable relationships in the family. From the booklet *Cómo realizamos una huerta orgánica?* Córdoba: CECOPAL/CEIP. 1993. Drawing: Mirta Lamarca.*

These activities raise women's status in the family through their contribution to family diet by producing fresh and good-quality food, and through their participation in community action which helps to satisfy other needs.

### Greater social impact

The rural and urban gardens contribute to food security of the poor, but further activities are necessary to increase their social impact:

- broadening the impact on family economy and health by increasing the quantity and quality of garden produce and promoting processing and storage of surpluses (dried vegetables, pickles, preserves) for later home consumption, or sale, or exchange with neighbours for other goods or services. Low-input technologies must be developed to reduce the labour inputs required;
- promoting more equitable relationships within the family to improve the position of the most vulnerable members: women and children. The roles of the different family members need to be discussed, not only related to gardening. However, stimulation of the greater participation of men and male youths in garden work could be a first step in the right direction;
- stimulating people's participation in community life. The gardening activities have greater social impact if they promote friendship, solidarity and better organisation among neighbours. In group work, conflict is likely to arise. Instead of ignoring this, development action should try to make these conflicts explicit and transform them into constructive action to help the group reach their goals.

### References

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