

# Can city farming survive?

*Early 1994 ETC Foundation asked Theobaldo Pinzàs to make an exploratory study on urban agriculture in Peru. This is an excerpt from his report, focusing on his findings about urban vegetable growing. In his full report, he suggests that more attention be given to recycling of waste and sewage water.*

## Theobaldo Pinzàs

In the 1980s several NGOs working with groups in poor urban areas decided to introduce vegetable gardens as an important element of their projects. The idea and the techniques were in most cases inspired by projects in Chile, where some of the NGO staff went for training. Some projects supported the establishment of communal vegetable gardens in areas owned by local governments or used by local groups, while others emphasised family gardens. The NGOs provided training for the project participants. The "model" was one of organic agriculture, including raising small animals (rabbits, guinea pigs, chickens) and making compost.

### Carrots for empowerment

Vegetable gardens were developed as an alternative for food production in poor urban areas, primarily intended for home consumption. With the emphasis on improved household nutrition, project participants were trained in nutrition and cooking vegetables. Families could also sell part of the harvest in local markets to generate some income. With few exceptions, work by NGOs in vegetable gardens had another longer-term and more important objective: to develop and strengthen the organisation of poor urban dwellers. The vegetable gardens were, in fact, a tool - or "carrot" - to reach a political objective. Thus, in many cases, the people trained to be instructors of small groups were also promoters of local organisation, local leaders, etc.

### Perù Mujer: an exception

The project of Perù Mujer (PM) started after contacts with a bio-garden project in 1983, which they wanted to make known in "pueblos jóvenes" (shanty towns) in southern Lima. The project did not aim at economic viability (an evaluation showed that it was not profitable) but at complementing the food needs of poor urban families through education and improved nutrition. No long-term objective was defined in terms of local organisation. PM emphasised the technical aid component to the groups. The project trained a team consisting of 15 (now 11) women, who acted as trainers and monitors of various groups cultivating vegetable gardens. These gardens are linked to women's groups (Club

de madres), schools, parish groups, groups of retired people, youth groups and the like. Team members were paid a small allowance. Funds came from OXFAM, who supported the project for several years. In PM's methodology, after well-structured training sessions, the group is supervised in the implementation phase and then visited weekly for follow-up. PM promoters have trained groups not only in Lima but also in numerous other cities. They report 126 groups in Lima and more than 6000 (home) vegetable gardens. In 1992, OXFAM support came to an end and PM has not applied for funding from other sources. As it is highly unlikely that the PM promoters will be able to continue by charging for their services, the future of their activities is uncertain.

### Constraints

Lack of water is a major constraint to vegetable gardening in the coastal region of Peru, where Lima and the other main cities are located. Furthermore, in the case of Lima, rapid urban growth has outpaced the construction of potable water-supply systems. Thus, many households in the shanty towns have to buy water from private suppliers. This water is much more expensive than water from the public system. Families buy it by the barrel and use it judiciously. In older poor areas of the city, houses are linked to the public network but the supply they get is so little, often just a few hours a day, and prices relatively so high, that families are not keen on using it to grow vegetables.

In addition, the average size of the allotments on which houses in poor areas are built decreased. Nowadays, urban specialists say the average area of new houses in shanty towns is around 80 m<sup>2</sup>, which does not leave much room for gardens.

Staff of NGOs approached during this study also stated that vegetable gardens are not sustainable in economic terms. Growing vegetables demands too much labour in relation to the benefits gained. Other alternatives, such as being a street vendor, are more rewarding in financial terms. This means that families are better off trying to earn some money through petty services. Some families specialise in growing vegetables for the local market, but this path is not taken by the majority and cannot be considered a significant survival strategy in urban areas.

Unfortunately, vegetables do not have an important place in the traditional or

present diet patterns of low-income families. Foodstuffs such as rice, noodles and bread, both made of for instance imported wheat flour or potatoes are preferred in low-income family diets.

### A future for city farming?

Urban agriculture in the form of vegetable gardens has been attempted by several NGOs in poor areas of Lima and other major cities. However, discussions with NGO staff revealed that most of them do not consider vegetable gardens to be viable in urban areas. Gardens have been kept and the families have dedicated time to them only when this activity was supported by the NGO's technical teams. Once the NGO leaves, usually when project funding ends, most families stop tending their gardens.

A broader perspective on "urban agriculture" or greening the city will be necessary to find suitable approaches in different agroecological and cultural areas. In Lima, lack of water and land severely constrain vegetable growing. Only innovative techniques, such as hydroponics or treating sewage water for irrigation, provide scope for alternatives. However, these would require experimentation before extension would be possible and would have to be adapted to each urban environment. ■

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