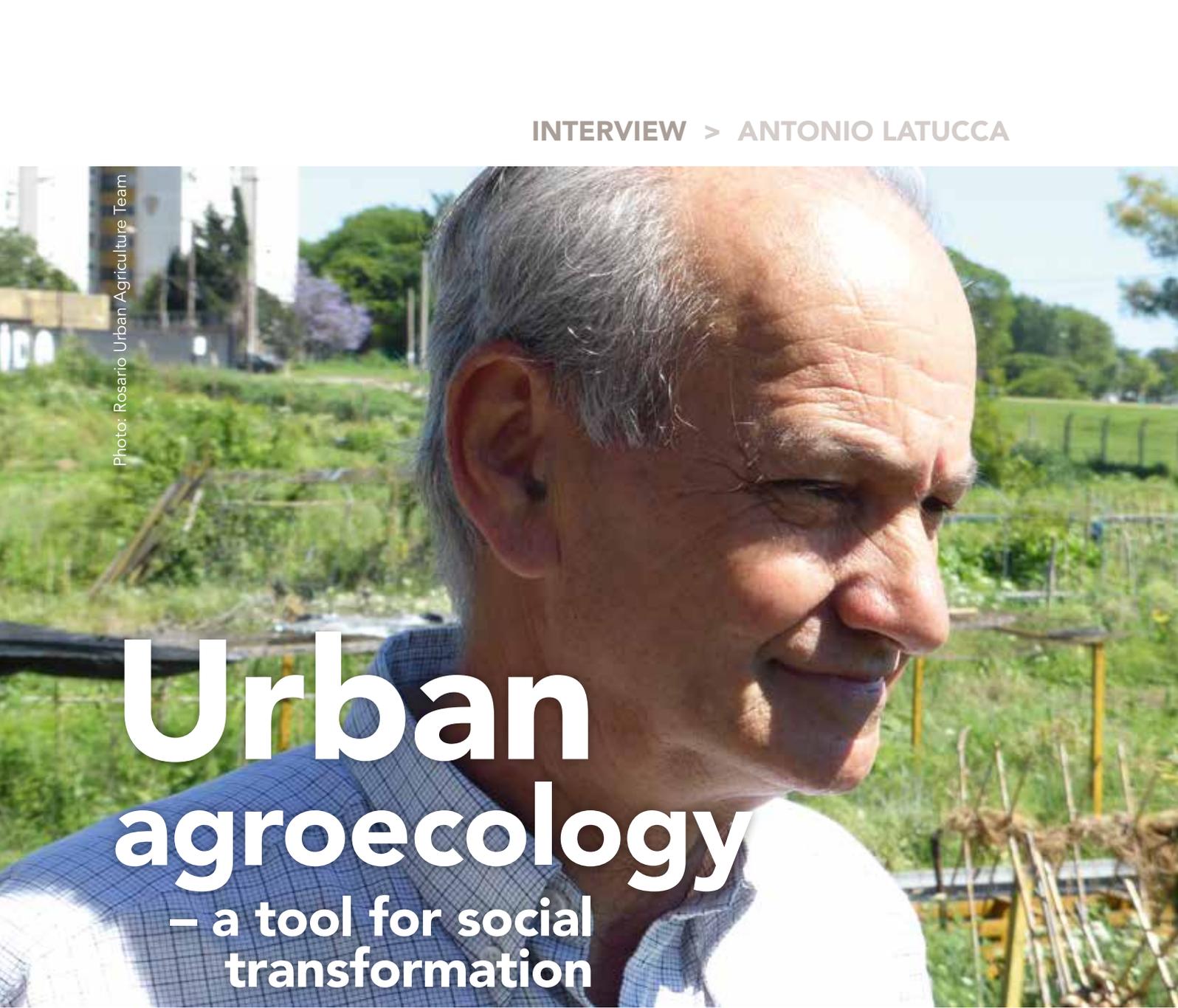


Photo: Rosario Urban Agriculture Team



# Urban agroecology

– a tool for social  
transformation

Antonio Lattuca is the director of the urban agriculture programme in the city of Rosario, 300 km northwest of Buenos Aires. It began as a response to the 2002 economic crisis in Argentina, building upon existing initiatives that promoted vegetable gardening among families and with schools. It is now one of the most successful urban agriculture initiatives in South America, connected to consumer groups, educational institutes, public policy and the gastronomy movement, and offers a great model that many are learning from.

Interview: Teresa Gianella-Estrems and Teobaldo Pinzás



The youth have been infected with enthusiasm for agroecology Photo: Silvio Moriconi

### What was the main motivation behind the urban agriculture programme?

At the end of the 1990s, there was an emerging movement for territorial development, and looking at the benefits from vegetable gardens, the municipality was interested in promoting local development, and establishing an inclusive municipal policy on urban farming. Building on experiences from earlier programmes which focused on agroecology and targeted disadvantaged neighbourhoods we defined a number of aims that would contribute to vulnerable urban families achieving food sovereignty. We wanted to improve neighbourhood landscapes by producing healthy organic food, to establish markets that directly connect farmers with consumers, to uncover the potential of unemployed people and secure tenure rights. We saw an urban agriculture programme as a most suitable vehicle to meet these objectives.

### Why did you choose agroecology as an approach?

We want to promote sustainable crop cultivation as a means for social transformation and to generate conditions for 'living well'. Agroecology has the advantage of using accessible technology while reducing the dependence on external inputs. Farmers learn to produce their own inputs and they manage the entire production process themselves.

### How big is the programme?

There are currently 1500 farmers who produce food for their own families and another 250 who also sell their surplus produce. And there are various types of urban farming in Rosario. Some are in families' own gardens, or in schools, or public parks, as well as on 24 hectares of 'unused land'. This land that is owned by the national government, the municipality or the

railway company, is divided into plots of between 600 m<sup>2</sup> and 2000 m<sup>2</sup> and free and secure tenure is assigned to interested families.

### Where is the produce sold and to whom?

Rosario's urban farmers produce the only widely available agroecological fruit and vegetables in the city. This food can be bought from the farms themselves, at farmers' 'agrochemical free' markets, through vegetable box schemes or eaten when dining out, as some urban farmers also sell their vegetables to restaurants.

The market for the programme's produce is expanding rapidly, and it has transformed from a niche market into a 'mass' market. Much effort has been made to ensure that the most vulnerable can produce or afford to buy seasonal fruit and vegetables. For example, families from the same neighbourhood can join 'exchange clubs'.

### How did the programme establish producer-consumer relations?

During its 13 years, the programme has built a trusting relationship between the state, urban farmers and consumers. The Network of Gardeners of Rosario has been very active. And, a consumer network the Green Life Network, organises farm visits, guarantees the purchase of vegetables before harvest, and many members participate actively in monthly 'healthy lunches', a farmer-inspired idea.

### Is this only an urban experience or are rural farmers involved?

We are actively involved in the National Forum for Family Farming which helped to create the national Secretariat for Family Farming in July 2014. The positive experience in Rosario was one of the reasons that small scale urban farmers became recognised by this new institution. This is important, as it enables them to be registered with the National Register of Family Farmers, which then gives rights to beneficial tax and pension schemes.

We work with farmers in Rosario's peri-urban zone but also those in the rural areas beyond, and with several associations and agroecology technicians. Through CEPAR, we are also linked to organic farmer networks in Argentina and with the Latin American Movement of Agroecology (MAELA). For the past few years, a movement promoting agrochemical-free rings around the towns in the highlands where Rosario is situated has become more active, with our programme being a focal point.

Amongst the participants, those with a rural farming background have been able to share and promote their agroecological knowledge, particularly that related to soil improvement and pest management.

**How are women and youth involved?** Through workshops and other activities, we build awareness about the need to change the asymmetric power relations between men and women. Women lead the network and make up 65% of all involved. They participate in all activities, in gardening, processing, management, and take a leading role in commercialisation in local markets.

We believe farmers and gardeners should be at the highest level of the social hierarchy, because without food, there is nothing. However our society still does not adequately appreciate farmers' work. We make an effort to improve the image of farmers and gardeners as caretakers of the environment. This helps to make urban farming more attractive to our youth.

Young people are increasingly active within the programme, and today, about 140 are training to become urban farmers. Some are members of cooperatives which offer ecological gardening services. Another youth group provides courses in vegetable gardening, while others train school children in the city centre. This latter work is particularly important because it encourages interactions between young people from the poorest neighbourhoods and those from the wealthier city centre.

### **What about training, and links to schools and universities?**

Training and long-term capacity building are at the core of our work. Learning starts in the field, and is complemented with workshops, encounters, exchanges, excursions, seminars and congresses. We value all knowledge and the associated wisdom embedded in farming practices.

We have created a mobile school that focuses on ecological crop production practices. The first 18

people have received their certificates and later this year a second group will follow. The certificate opens opportunities for them to work as specialists in ecological farming.

The programme is embedded in 40 schools that have vegetable gardens to promote healthy food and care for the environment. We also undertake many activities with different faculties at the University of Rosario, including the Faculties of Agrarian Sciences, Architecture, Medicine and Civil Engineering.

## **We value all knowledge and wisdom embedded in farming practices**

**How do you share your experience?** Our pioneering experience has inspired other urban agriculture initiatives across Argentina, in Morón, Mar del Plata, Rio Cuarto, Corrientes, Tucumán and Santiago de Estero. And we have also inspired other Latin American cities that are now implementing urban agriculture initiatives, including Lima in Peru, Belo Horizonte and Guarulhos in Brazil, and Bogotá in Colombia.

Political decision makers, technicians and professionals from other cities have visited us to learn and adapt our experiences to their situations. Many come during our annual Week of Urban Agriculture called RAICES (Roots: Networks, Food, Inclusion, Culture, Ecology, Solidarity) that we have organised for the past 12 years. Our farmers and team members also actively participate in other events.

**What makes the programme so relevant?** Although we work primarily on urban farming, our programme is strongly focused on social issues such as territorial approaches, agroecology, social inclusion and environmental protection. The programme has built bridges between the rural and the urban, between the public and private sectors, and between farmers, consumers and civil society as a whole. And in particular, we have helped to transform the image of farmers into a positive one, and farmers are now appreciated in Rosario as caretakers of the earth and our landscapes. And perhaps most importantly, the youth, the farmers of the future, have been infected with enthusiasm for agroecology as an innovative occupation.

*For more information visit [www.agriurbanarosario.com.ar](http://www.agriurbanarosario.com.ar) or [twitter.com/AgriUrbanaRosar](https://twitter.com/AgriUrbanaRosar)*

**Preparing land for vegetable gardens.**

Photo: Rosario Urban Agriculture Team

