



Vegetables and fruit for the urban population of Havana, produced right in the middle of the city.

Cuba's success story, further developed

The potential of urban agriculture for feeding a growing population is becoming increasingly visible. In Cuba, “urban farms” contribute to a large extent to the island’s food self-sufficiency. As in all food production systems, women play a very important role in urban agriculture. Recognising this role and the overall contribution of women, makes for even better results.

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Statistics worldwide show that the world’s urban areas keep growing – in particular in the less industrialised countries. It was estimated that in 2005, half of the world’s population lived in cities, and that the total numbers will double by 2030. The production of vegetables in and around cities is therefore growing, in response to the urgent need to feed urban dwellers. The advantages of urban agriculture are being increasingly recognised: it contributes to community development and local organisation, as well as to the production of a great diversity of food, in large quantities.

Urban agriculture in Cuba

Cuba is one of the countries in which urban agriculture has developed the most. A severe food crisis hit the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The production of food in the cities was seen as one of the solutions to the problem (reducing transportation costs and as well as the need for machinery). Special emphasis was placed on production without external inputs (as these were not available), resulting in highly efficient organic systems. The problem of having many “new” producers was that they lacked experience in producing

vegetables on small plots. Therefore an extensive network was built up for the provision of training courses and extension services, and the distribution of seeds and tools. As a result, urban agriculture has shown an impressive growth during the last 15 years. It is now estimated that at least 350 000 “urban farmers” grow crops on more than 70 000 hectares. Whereas in 1994 Cuban cities harvested 4 000 tonnes of vegetables, the Ministry of Agriculture recently reported that during the first three months of 2009, the total harvest of vegetables exceeded 400 000 tonnes; largely reducing the need to import food.

Located only a few kilometres east of Havana’s centre, Vivero Alamar is a co-operative of 170 producers working on 11 hectares, right in the middle of a highly-populated neighbourhood. It started in 1997, when a plot of 3.7 hectares of unused land was given by the government to a small group of producers. Today it is one of Cuba’s most famous “*organopónicos*”, as these agricultural enterprises are known. They all produce organic vegetables (even if most are not certified organic), which are sold either directly to consumers or through the local markets. Alamar shows high (and increasing) production levels throughout the year. Local schools and hospitals also benefit, as they receive at least 10 percent of the vegetables produced. All co-operative members receive a

monthly salary which is much higher than the average wage of a civil servant.

Managers of the *organopónicos* have considered a series of incentives in order to attract both male and female members, such as a seven-hour workday and possibilities for formal education. But these efforts have never been separated from the traditional and widespread notion that men are responsible for working outside the home and earning money, while women are to take care of the family, with no financial remuneration. Even though Cuba's political system ensures equality between all members of society, in most areas, women combine the responsibility of working and caring for the family, while men have only a marginal role in the latter.

We were not really equal...

Considering that objectives as self-esteem and respect to all producers have been top priority in Alamar since 1997, and the fact that almost one third of all members are women, we decided to look in detail at the roles of men and women. We started with a thorough appraisal, considering specific tools and also running open interviews. We organised a series of workshops with all co-operative members, highlighting what



Photo: UBFC Vivero Alamar

Women producers play an important role in the co-operative.

The results were clear. They showed that in spite of the rhetoric, our successful *organopónico* was reproducing the traditional stereotypes of Cuban and Latin American societies, where women have more responsibilities, but less decision-making power. As expected in a *machista* society, our results showed that men are not much involved in household activities. Women take care of their children, but at the same time, they participate fully in all production activities.

The survey showed that men and women had different expectations. Men hardly recognised that women are also interested in higher yields for the co-operative, while women considered men and women to have similar needs and objectives in that respect. Women expressed a specific need for further training and interest in a more active participation in decision-making at all levels.

Starting in January 2009, all results were presented to the members of the co-operative. We had interesting discussions about the results – especially when looking at the inequities. But, more important, the management team took the results seriously. It was not possible to force men to simply play a more active role at home, so Vivero Alamar organised a series of internal seminars on gender issues, aiming at “institutionalising equity” within our co-operative and helping all members to reach their personal objectives. We offered additional training to women, especially on production issues such as seed conservation or pest control. Special attention has been given since then to the participation of women on exchange visits, as trainees and also as trainers. Women have played a

Box 1. Daily activities

Time	Activity	Women	Men
5.00 – 7.00	Prepare breakfast	x	
	Feed animals		x
	Get children ready	x	
7.00 – 12.00	Go to work	x	x
	Daily activities in Vivero Alamar	x	x
	Lunch	x	x
13.00 – 18.00	Daily activities in Vivero Alamar	x	x
	Get children from school/check homework	x	
18.00 – 23.00	Prepare dinner	x	
	Eat dinner	x	x
	Study	x	
	Watch TV/Rest	x	x

we hoped to achieve and inviting everybody to participate. Men and women were placed in separate teams and asked to make lists of all their daily activities (see Box 1) and then used the results as part of the discussions. In another workshop, also with separate teams, we asked the participants to state their needs and objectives, and to show if, according to them, these apply to both men and women (see Box 2).

Box 2. Needs and expectations

According to men...	Men	Women	According to women...	Men	Women
	need/want to			need/want to	
Increase production levels and yields	x		Increase production levels and yields	x	x
Ensure an income	x		Ensure an income	x	x
Improve environmental aspects	x	x	Protect the environment	x	x
Improve worker's own training options	x	x	Have access to training options		x
Increase work efficiency	x		Health security	x	x
Improve irrigation systems and seed quality	x		Help more at home		x
Improve working conditions	x	x	Have sufficient access to all resources	x	x
Increase the number of recreational activities	x	x	Participate in all decision-making processes		x
			Increase their own communication with children	x	x

more important role as Alamar's representatives in various "innovation festivals" or "agrobiodiversity fairs", which are organised regularly throughout the country. This has been very useful for all those involved: some of our female workers were able to establish links with representatives of other organisations, exchanging seeds and ideas. But it has been very useful for Vivero Alamar as well, as women's participation in internal discussions has increased dramatically. As Norma Romero, one of the most active participants in this project said, "this has helped us to combine training and an exchange of ideas; sustainability and empowerment".

Our analysis also showed that many women in the co-operative are single mothers, with specific needs and concerns which we somehow had to meet. At the same time, we saw that there are certain roles and responsibilities for which women are better suited than men – and we could make good use of that. This was shown in a small survey we did among consumers (those who buy our products at the co-operative's gate): they preferred women as salespersons as they are more friendly, much more alert and know more about the quality of the products. Paying attention to these issues gave us an opportunity to strengthen our links with the local population. We are now in a better position to fulfil our role as producers of food that is healthy and available to all.

Changes and continuity

Although women represent less than a third of our workforce (43 out of 170 co-operative members), we are proud that half of our managers are women (leading, for example, the

commercialisation unit, the personnel office and the financial department). Their election to these positions was the result of a democratic process in which all members were involved. But it was certainly also the result of our own reflective process and of our recognition of the contribution made by women.

Acknowledging the positive results that have been achieved by small-scale production units, and recognising the need to further increase food production on the island (especially after the devastating impact of hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008), the Cuban government is now assigning land to individuals or groups, hoping that these units will be managed as efficiently as the urban *organopónicos*. Starting with peri-urban areas (at approximately 10 km distance from the cities), this will lead to many opportunities for increasing production levels. But it also presents new challenges, as, once again, few producers will have the expertise and knowledge for producing on small-scale plots. Recognising the current and potential role of women will only help us all to reach our objectives. ■

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Women farmers on food sovereignty: Senegal



My name is Wolimata Thiaw, I'm 57 years old. I am married, and have children and even grandchildren; the eldest is already 25 years old. I live in Popenguine, 71 kilometres from Dakar, the capital of Senegal. I am president of a women's group there, COPRONAT, which fights for the protection of the environment.

We women have an important role to play in food security and it starts in our homes! We cannot go on consuming imported food products. The food customs within our families must change and this change has to come from us. All our dishes are based on rice, whereas we can also prepare many delicious dishes with

maize, millet or beans. And all of these products are cultivated in Senegal, so they are plentiful, less expensive and they can preserve our children's health. We don't need factories to transform food products into nice food, we just need some creativity!

In Popenguine, land prices have gone up because of land speculation. Women have little chance to obtain land. To circumvent this problem, we should promote the cultivation of subsistence crops. Women can also farm more vegetables to nourish the family and even to sell on the market. Instead of its failed programme GOANA ("Great Offensive for Food and Abundance"), the government could initiate a project focused on women. You could think of something like "one woman, five boxes!" to promote vegetable gardening. If every woman would receive five boxes to grow her own vegetables, she wouldn't need a garden and it would mean a lot for the availability of healthy food in all households. We could fabricate the boxes using other materials than wood. We could make our own compost by re-using household waste and thus have green fertiliser. Many of the things we commonly do in our homes could be used to initiate projects promoting ecological sustainability.

Interview and photo: **Saftou Sall** editor AGRIDAPE, the West African edition of the LEISA network.