

Struggles of Rooftop Farming in Porto Alegre, Brazil

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On a 60m² terrace on the ninth floor of a building in Borges de Medeiros Avenue, one of the landmarks of Porto Alegre, members of the “Solidarity Mixed Cooperative of Utopia and Luta Movement” grow over a thousand lettuces and arugula heads per month. Cultivation is done hydroponically. Seedlings are grown in greenhouses to protect the plants from urban pests and dirt. Produce goes to building residents and is sold by “word of mouth”. Recently, the production is being marketed to two restaurants.

Utopia e Luta (Utopia and Struggle) claims to operate the only rooftop farm in Porto Alegre. The movement was born during the World Social Forum in 2005 when attention was drawn to the issue of homelessness and the many empty buildings in the centre of Porto Alegre. One building, which had been empty for 17 years, had received many complaints from neighbouring residents. It was occupied during this manifestation. Soon after, a cooperative was created, the Utopia and Struggle Cooperative (CoopSul), so as to have a legal entity supporting the planting activities. Planting was already ongoing on the rooftop, with seedlings donated by other movements. Second-hand bathtubs filled with soil were used for production.

In 2009, the cooperative received public funding from Petrobras, and this allowed them to set up separate cooperative economic activities in the building. These included a bakery, a hydroponic vegetable garden, a laundry, a T-shirt printing activity and more recently a sewing workshop. The funding was also used for adapting the building for these activities and installing an elevator. The cooperative has not been very successful in generating other revenue however, and still struggles.

In 2016, a German NGO supported the cooperative to engage in training and learning. Each economic activity had a designated person who received a Brazilian minimum wage for a year and a half. This allowed the coop members to dedicate themselves to getting organised. Thanks to this support, Utopia was able to raise its rooftop production levels and partner with two major restaurants. This collaboration allows them to maintain the rooftop farming business even though no revenue comes from it yet. Also, several workshops were held for people who have long been unemployed. They want to learn to make a living from making bread or vegetable gardening and come to the cooperative in search of knowledge.

Envisioned to be a free political environment for its residents, Utopia was supposed to have selected members with no or minimal financial means who could live in the small apartments and work for the cooperative. The building would be a community space open to the public, so everyone could use it and learn, with no required membership.

Unfortunately, this turned out to be challenging for several reasons. Out of the 103 residents, only six participate in the activities and another nine sporadically come and go. The small number of participants is related to internal disputes regarding individual versus collective needs. And even though the movement was set up as a cooperative, there is no organisational structure. Each activity has a designated person who is responsible for checking supplies and running essential errands, but it is merely a designated person instead of a coordinator.

In addition, Utopia, politically neutral, was co-opted by different political parties prior to the elections of 2014, causing a rupture between some of the residents who then decided to leave the building. As a result, many apartments ended up vacant. It proved hard to attract new residents with a cooperative spirit and knowledge of its procedures and activities. Moreover, once residents decide they no longer need to stay in the building, they sometimes give the keys to acquaintances who have no idea of Utopia's history or procedures. As a result, out of the initial economic activities, only two are still running, the bakery and the vegetable garden.

The hydroponic vegetable garden produces arugula, lettuce, cherry tomatoes and herbs like basil, marjoram, and oregano. This year there was a big harvest of kale, parsley and chives. During the spring-summer season, it produces up to 1,400 heads of arugula per month in the 60m² greenhouse. In the winter, because of the many cloudy days, production is only half that amount. The hydroponic means of production attracted the restaurant owners. Arugula is sold the most, being responsible alone for the maintenance of the garden. Robson Reinoso, the designated person for the vegetable garden, was trained by Hydroponic Consultancy and since 2016 has been responsible for training and assistance to other members of the cooperative.

The strength of the cooperative is being a space where the potential to generate and exchange knowledge, income, and forms of food production come together. The cooperative uses urban public spaces to promote itself. It does this through the participation in organic and neighbourhood fairs, associations and events. The challenge remains to structure the economic activities and get people to participate and make Utopia a point of reference again for other social movements.

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