

Urban Agriculture in Brazil

Cecilia Rocha

School of Nutrition and Centre for Studies in Food Security

Ryerson University

Food for Talk Seminar Series – December 02, 2005

York University

Summary

The presentation will focus on how urban agriculture is being re-invented in the context of recent developments in Brazil such as urbanization trends, the UN Millennium Development Goals, the Hunger Zero Program, and social and economic data from the latest National Household Survey. The participation of municipal governments in the development of UA projects has been pointed out as a factor in their success. Examples from Belo Horizonte, Curitiba and Governador Valadares will be discussed.

I – Context

To understand the role of UA in Brazil, a few recent developments serve as context. In particular, I would like to draw the attention to the importance of 1) urbanization trends; 2) the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); 3) the Brazilian Hunger Zero Program; and 4) recent data from the National Household Survey (*Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios-PNAD*).

1) Urbanization

I would say that UA is being re-invented in Brazil because, until very recently, having a vegetable or herb garden, or even fruit trees in backyards in urban centres was very common. My grandparents were first-generation rural-urban migrants, who brought with them the skills and customs of a rural life. They raised chicken (and occasionally, some turkey and pigs) in what is now downtown Belo Horizonte. In their property they had fruit trees (bananas, avocados, oranges, papayas, limes), and a vegetable, herb, medicinal, and flower garden. This was from the 50's to the 70's, when the country was being transformed from “mostly rural”, to “mostly urban”.

Today, Brazil is over 80% urban, and the majority of people living in urban areas are one or two generations away from their predecessors' rural lives. UA is being re-invented in this new context.

2) MDGs

The FAO *Status of Food Insecurity in the World* (SOFI-2004) points out Brazil as one of the few countries on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, in particular MDG 1: *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger* by 2015. The report suggests that the key to such success has been:

- a) significantly better than average rates of agricultural growth;
- b) *“implementing a twin-track strategy to attack hunger – strengthening social safety nets to put food on the tables of those who need it most on the one hand, while attacking the root causes of hunger with initiatives to stimulate food production, increase employability and reduce poverty on the other”*.

This puts to rest an unfruitful debate between “assistance” versus “structural” approaches to reduce poverty and hunger.

“The idea is to bring the two tracks together in a ‘virtuous circle’ of improving food assistance to the needy and improving food availability by using locally produced food, which can result in rising incomes and additional improvements to food security.”

We can ask how UA fits into this approach.

3) Hunger Zero Program

UA is listed as one of the possible initiatives which municipal governments can undertake and receive support from the federal government under the Hunger Zero Program.

4) PNAD 2004

The latest National Household Survey (*Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios – PNAD 2004*), just released last November 25, shows some modest, but still significant improvements in the lives of most Brazilians.

Some highlights:

- Percentage of school age children out of school: 2.9% (4.3% in 2003)
- Increase in formal employment: 6.6%
- Labour force participation by women: 45.6% (highest ever)
- Average monthly real income: R\$733 (CDN\$385) – same as in 2003; but for the first time since 1996 there is no decrease!
- Women received on average 69.5% of average men’s income. The gender income differential in formal employment is only (!) 10.8%.
- Improvement in income distribution: Gini coefficient: 0.547 (the lowest since 1981; though still one of the highest in the world):

10% poorer income-earners	+ 4%
50% poorer income-earners	+ 3.2%
50% higher income-earners	- 0.6%
10% higher income-earners	- 1.7%

II – Urban Agriculture in Brazil

The new UA is being re-invented as a “program”, or strategic action of local governments and NGOs. Hence, we are looking at UA from this perspective: as promoted by NGOs and local governments (quite often, in partnerships).

I would also say that the driving force behind UA in Brazil is slightly different from the UA developed in Africa, for example – and, in many ways, it is closer to what happens in cities like Toronto. While in African countries the main driving forces for UA are “feeding people” (i.e., producing food for auto-consumption) and income generation, I would say that in Brazil the driving forces tend to be “community development” and “environmental concerns” (e.g., sustainable cities). That is not to say that UA in Brazil is not contributing in promoting better diets among those

practicing it, or in generating some extra income for low-income participants. The benefits of UA are many, and they do include improvement in diets and income generation.

But in Brazil UA's objectives are also to:

- promote community spirit;
- serve as pedagogical tools (schools);
- maintain public lots clean and utilized;
- rescue and preserve local food habits and traditions.
- serve as occupational therapy (special-needs children, youth, and adults; the elderly; in hospitals);

III – Examples

III.1 – Curitiba

In 2005, the Municipal Secretariat of Food Supply of Curitiba estimates that around 3,000 tons of food will be harvested from its UA projects. It has 280 hectares under cultivation, benefiting close to 6,900 people.

Main products: herbs and leafy vegetables, medicinal plants, corn, beans, carrots, okra, etc.

Role of the municipal government:

- make available public spaces;
- provide technical assistance, inputs (seeds, seedlings, fertilizers, etc.)
- teaching on how to prepare the soil and how to plant;
- monitoring of implementation for one year.

Although it has been estimated that 531 families will earn the equivalent of R\$500/month (a little less than 2 minimum-salaries), the main goals of the programs have been occupational therapy (in nursing homes and psychiatric clinics).

III.2 – Belo Horizonte

In BH, the Municipal Secretariat of Food Supply (SMAAB) partnered with an NGO (*Rede de Intercâmbio de Tecnologias Alternativas*) in 1995 to create the project Centres for Agroecological Living (*Centros de Vivência Agroecológica – Cevae*) in low-income neighbourhoods. Four Centres were created. The partnership ended in 2001. These centres proposed to promote urban sustainable development through participatory construction.

Main achievements of the Centres include:

- community mobilization to improve their physical surroundings (cleaning up streets and other public areas);
- 60 families received support to develop gardens in their backyards;
- many workshops and short-term courses on medicinal plants, nutrition basics, waste reduction and recycling.

III.3 – Governador Valadares

Probably one of the most successful projects on UA in the country, urban agriculture in Governador Valadares has thrived as a partnership between the local municipal government, many local NGOs and international funders (including UN-Habitat, UNDP, and IDRC), initiated in 2003.

Results:

- 47 gardens (community associations, therapy groups, schools and daycare centres);
- it directly affects 230 families;
- 25% of the gardens are able to sell some of their products.

Important role of government: change of local legislation. Four municipal laws to support UA are being proposed: 1) creation of a Municipal Program for UA; 2) lowering property taxes on properties to be used for UA; 3) public supply of water for UA; 4) integrate the UA project into the City Plan.