

CUBA

URBAN AGRICULTURE

In the early 1990s Cuba faced an economic crisis, with emergency food shortages in cities, rising food prices and a growing black market. Fruit and vegetables, even when produced in plenty in the country, often rotted in fields and warehouses because transport and distribution systems were also in crisis. Today food is more available, prices have fallen and quality has improved. To a great extent this results from a government policy of supporting urban and peri-urban agriculture at a community level.

Until the 1990s urban agriculture was barely known in Cuba, but at the time of the crisis many urban residents began to farm empty lots to make up for the lack of food in the shops. However these efforts were undermined by insecure access to land, and limited skills and agricultural capital.

In recognition of the contribution urban agriculture was making to the crisis, the City of Havana set up a Provincial Commission to support city farmers, including representatives of relevant Ministries (e.g. Health, Hydraulic Resources, Physical Planning) and organisations with a popular support base such as the Federation of Cuban Women.

A map of the province was drawn up which included all of the free areas that could be used for future urban agricultural production. By 1993 land use rights were changed to make it easy for residents to apply for land - any unused land could be given to a gardener in permanent usufruct ownership and it would remain his or hers as long as it remained under cultivation. In addition the Commission made seeds and irrigation systems available for farmers to buy and used a system of extension agents to help train farmers and disseminate agricultural skills.

By 1994 the scale of urban agriculture was such that it was felt that more permanent structures should be set up to support it, and accordingly a group for Urban Agriculture was set up in the National Ministry of Agriculture and a provincial Agricultural Commission of the City of Havana was established, as well as a National Urban Agriculture Program to

extend support to cities throughout the country. Urban agriculture was fully institutionalised and the temporary Commission could be dissolved by 1996.

A decade since the initiatives began, 18,000 people practice urban agriculture in the city of Havana, farmed land occupies 1000 ha of the city, and land for urban agriculture has been fully integrated into the city's Land Use Plan since 2000. As well as vegetables the farms produce herbs, medicinal plants, rice, fruit, honey, pigs, chicken, rabbits - and production is rising so fast that some areas are producing 30% of their residents' calorific intake.

Much of the success of the approach is due to the fact that the government support systems were flexible and responsive, working through negotiated co-operation with farmers. Thus for example rules were changed to allow farmers to sell their produce directly through farmers' markets rather than through government stores (to reduce transport costs and ensure that food stays fresh) and the government program also decentralised seed stores to make them more accessible to farmers.

Cuba's initiative shows that approaches such as urban agriculture, frequently greeted with suspicion by officials, can reap even greater rewards where comprehensive and flexible support is given by city authorities.



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