

“The farm in the city”: A community garden and engagement in a vulnerable neighborhood

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Abstract: This study analyzed the installation of a community garden in a condominium in Heliópolis, a socially vulnerable neighborhood in São Paulo, and the motivations of its participants. Through engaged, reflective case study methods, including field diary, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, data was collected for analysis while maintaining epistemological vigilance. The community garden was established through an online crowdfunding campaign. It helped improve nutrition, contributed to the household budget, and expanded the variety of vegetables consumed, including non-conventional edible plants. Moreover, the garden became a space for socialization, reclaiming affective memory, providing meaningful activities for older adults, and connecting children in the condominium with the practice of growing food. Community gardening emerged as an important strategy for promoting health and mitigating food insecurity.

Keywords: Community garden; food insecurity; socialization; urban and peri-urban agriculture.

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Introduction

Severe food insecurity or hunger affects 33.1 million Brazilians, mainly among households headed by Black or mixed-raced women with lower education levels (MALUF et al., 2022). The situation is aggravated by the double burden of malnutrition, that is, the coexistence of overweight and undernutrition (MS, 2023; POPKIN et al. 2020), and the higher average price of natural and minimally processed foods compared with ultra-processed foods (MAIA et al. 2015). To minimize this situation, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations indicates that it is essential to eradicate hunger, ensure food and nutritional security, and promote the availability of these foods at affordable prices, especially for the most vulnerable populations (FAO 2014, 2021). As proposed by the United Nations, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes among its objectives the intention of eradicating hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, in addition to promoting more sustainable forms of food production, ensuring access for all to safe, healthy and nutritious food (UNDP, 2015).

In urban environments, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of the food supply system, in which much of the production of fruit, vegetables, and greens is located far from large urban centers, dependent on transportation chains and marketing channels, increasing the price of food and distancing consumers from producers (FAO 2014; FERREIRA, 2020; MALUF et al., 2022). Given this scenario, community gardens could be included in the range of social policy options that seek to restore citizenship and urban sustainability, having been identified as a viable alternative to increase the food supply for urban residents (FAO 2014; PALAR et al., 2019).

Seeking the interface between community gardens and improved nutrition, we conducted a database search (PubMed, SciELO) in April 2023 using the descriptors: community garden, health promotion, and nutrition, in English; horta comunitária, promoção da saúde e nutrição, in Portuguese, respectively, to find articles published between 2013 and 2023. This search yielded 15 articles, both quantitative and qualitative, linking community and school gardens to impacts on the nutrition of children and adolescents, as a means of preventing overweight and obesity while improving nutrition and well-being. Only two articles analyzed community gardens and their contribution to community well-being, and their influence on the nutritional and social environment (EGLI et al. 2016; PALAR et al., 2019).

Based on a literature review, the study by Egli et al. (2016) developed a model that articulates the benefits of participating in community gardens for laypeople so that the information can be applied in practice. The well-being benefits were grouped into factors that influence the nutritional health environment and factors that influence the social environment. The study by Palar et al. (2019) interviewed 32 low-income participants in an urban home gardening program in California. They found perceptions of nutritional and health benefits primarily related to increased access to fresh food, motivated by improved health and pride in their gardens. Therefore, this article seeks to fill some gaps identified in the literature regarding people's motivations for getting involved in and maintaining a community garden that can improve access to healthy foods.

To sustain initiatives like this and promote dietary changes requires going beyond the installation of growing spaces. It is fundamental to understand people's life stories and motivations for engaging in the activities of preparing and maintaining a community garden. From there, we can devise strategies and projects that mobilize and foster engagement and transformation.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze the installation of a community garden and its significance for the residents of a condominium in Heliópolis, a region of high social vulnerability.

Method

The qualitative research approach engenders an engaged case study inspired by the work of physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer (FARMER, 2008). We selected the case study as the research modality because it deals with a specific object, delimited and contextualized in the Heliópolis neighborhood of the city of São Paulo. This method seeks to understand contemporary phenomena within a real context, through empirical investigation based on field planning, data collection and analysis that is supported by a theoretical and practical framework which emerges from the study's guiding questions and propositions (YIN, 2015; VENTURA, 2007; MARTINS, 2008).

Farmer developed the concept of "pragmatic solidarity" based on his extensive experience in public health, during his work as a health professional in vulnerable communities in Haiti and Africa (FARMER, 2008, p. 6). From this perspective, the core of this methodology is to seek to develop "pragmatic solidarity" (FARMER, 2008, p. 10) and discuss issues with the community, seeking ways to act in common agreement. This involves the idea of a link between action and reflection, with an urgent need to support people living in vulnerable environments with concrete measures (FARMER, 2008). Thus, research in a resource-poor community is not only about dealing with fragilities, but also with dialogues between knowledges, perceiving the potential and strategies that emerge to face adversity (FARMER, 2008; NUNES et al. 2020). It is worth noting that the idea for the garden arose from the community itself, which contacted us, the researchers, through a community leader. Therefore, the process of designing, preparing and installing the garden took place through meetings and discussions with interested residents. Ethically and politically applied research fosters engagement, and in this scenario, to some extent the researcher is a constituent part of the process, interacting with their subjects in the production of knowledge while respecting the chosen methodology (SCHRAIBER, 2015). Therefore, this work was reflective, seeking to avoid compromising the theoretical contribution and, consequently, the scientific quality of the study. To this end, epistemological vigilance (BOURDIEU, 1995) was adopted to ensure that the data, analyses, and theory are consistent with the study's purpose.

During the fieldwork, we used a field diary and participant observation, in which detailed notes of the group meetings were recorded. Furthermore, we conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the community garden's regular participants, identifying their opinions regarding the garden's importance, eating habits, and meanings attributed

to food.

To understand and analyze the data, Bardin's (2016) method of thematic content analysis was used to identify the core meanings of the interviews and organize them into non-a priori categories. Our analysis revealed the following main thematic categories: life history and relationship with the land, relationship with food, and socialization. To maintain participant anonymity, the individuals were identified by fictitious names.

Study location: Cidade Nova Heliópolis Community

The Heliópolis community is located in the city of São Paulo. According to the *Secretaria Municipal de Habitação* [Municipal Housing Department] (2016), the average monthly per capita family income of residents in this area was R\$479.85 (US\$138.45; mean exchange rate, 2016), equivalent to 54% of the Brazilian minimum wage. The unemployment rate was 14% in 2017 (UNAS, 2021). Approximately 40% of families are composed of a mother and children, with the mother being the sole breadwinner (SOARES et al. 2010). Due to the high prevalence of unemployment, population density, low educational level, high birth rates, and limited opportunities for social mobility, social vulnerability rates in Heliópolis are considered high to very high (SEADE, 2013).

The site chosen for the community research was the condominium affiliated with the *Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano do Estado de São Paulo* [São Paulo State Housing Authority], known as “Redondinhos,” a cylindrical building with colorful facades, designed by architect Ruy Ohtake. The condominium is considered a landmark by local residents, and houses approximately 1,400 people. The center features a playground, a sports court, and a community space. It should be noted, however, that the location chosen for the vegetable garden was initially located near the entrance to the condominium and was later relocated between two buildings near the entrance (condominiums 1 and 2). This space was primarily used by the residents of these two buildings, approximately 130 people.

Results and Discussion

Approaching the community and the process of installing the garden

Through the community leader, a broad call was made to residents via a WhatsApp® group, inviting everyone to join the community garden group in the condominium. A banner was posted at the entrance announcing the space as a community garden. Most activities and visits took place on Saturday mornings, but many residents were unable to attend because they were working at this time. Initially, a small space of just 12 m² (129 sq ft) was used, along with reused materials like grocery store crates. The area initially chosen for planting had certain limitations, such as the size of the bed, the quality of the soil, and partial shade that prevented the vegetables from growing. The participants decided to split the amount of money among themselves to purchase supplies. Our observations

indicated that the contributions were low, and were insufficient to improve the garden. Thus, due to difficulties among the participants, it was necessary to launch an online fundraising campaign. With the funds raised, the 12 m² garden was extended to an area of approximately 100 m² (1,076 sq ft). The community effort to extend the garden did not attract any new adult participants, but many children became regular participants.

From the initial field survey and activity planning meetings, residents shared their preferences and needs regarding the location and crop varieties. Among the species suggested by participants were: sorrel, cilantro (coriander), chicory, parsley, lettuce, okra, and tomato. Other species suggested by us, due to the soil quality, climatic conditions, ease of production, and organic management maintenance, included zucchini (courgette), pumpkin, eggplant (aubergine), chicory, and purple chicory, and unconventional food plants, such as common purslane, nasturtium, lamb's-ear, and turmeric. The species that thrived were: chicory, sorrel, lettuce, tomato, and pumpkin. The most productive were zucchini (courgette), chicory, cilantro (coriander), tomato, and sorrel. Meetings were held weekly during the first two months, providing privileged opportunities for participant observation. With autonomy and a self-sustaining garden in mind, workshops were held on soil and bed preparation, composting, seeding, water reuse cisterns, planting, replanting, and planning post-installation visits to ensure crop development. In addition, culinary workshops were held on preparing and tasting unconventional food plants, how to use the peels and stems of fruits, vegetables and greens, and discussions on successful varieties and technical support.

Following the garden's expansion, meetings were spaced out to observe how participants adapted to the new space. The garden group was monitored for 12 months, with weekly visits initially, followed by biweekly visits for another four months, and monthly visits until the project's one-year anniversary.

An average of 14 people participated in these meetings, including adults and some children. Over the first few months, we observed that among the residents who participated in the activities, seven joined in preparing the soil, but only five remained committed to daily garden maintenance: four elderly women and one man in his fifties, two of whom were from Brazil's Northeast region. These people were chosen for the in-depth interviews.

When visits became monthly, we observed the group taking ownership of the space, increasing the variety of species, including chayote, pineapple, sweet potato, cucumber, pepper, cherry tomato, purple chicory, cilantro (coriander), and watermelon. We witnessed several harvests alongside condominium residents and vegetable donations to other vulnerable families. In addition to the exchange of knowledges among adults and children, there were also several initiatives to improve the garden, including aesthetically, incorporating pots and colorful signs with the names of the varieties being cultivated. The residents continued to maintain watering, weeding, and installing a new fence to prevent cats and dogs from invading the flowerbeds, among other things. There were accounts that the garden became quite popular, with harvests taking place among residents and children, who often harvested for their mothers. Even with the increase in harvesting, there was no increased engagement in the management and care of the garden.

Motivations of the participants: life story, relationship with the garden and food

The motivations that lead people to get involved in community gardens are unclear (NAGIB et al. 2021). In a study of community gardens in primary health centers, Costa et al. (2015) reported greater adhesion among older adults, the majority of whom had agricultural work experience and similar life stories, reconnecting with their roots, and childhood and family memories. Biazoti and Sorrentino (2022) affirm that most of the participants in the community gardens they studied were also from rural backgrounds. As children, these people accompanied their parents or grandparents in growing food for their own consumption. Thus, home gardens were a common denominator in the memories of the interviewees. These observations show that the current relationship with gardens revives an emotional memory from childhood or youth that was dormant following their migration to urban centers.

In this study, one of the motivations participants revealed for getting involved with gardening was their prior relationship with cultivating food, whether among those who migrated to the metropolis or those who witnessed the city's expansion. Many people living in peripheral or rural neighborhoods of São Paulo in the 1940s raised animals and produced their own food for subsistence. Back then, backyards had certain prominence, they were spaces of biodiversity, of popular knowledge, and of an intimate connection with the natural world.

We swept the yard with a *guanxuma* [arrowleaf sida] broom. My grandfather had a chicken coop, I think it was bigger than this kitchen (...) He had a garden, a pair of geese, a parrot, and he planted flowers in the front yard. (Carmen)

I learned to use a hoe because of my dad. We'd go to his farm and he'd say, "Come and help dad, get a hoe," (...) and I forced myself, I picked up his skills. (Fátima)

Despite this, these experiences do not all stem from the same sentiment, even though everyone recounted a difficult childhood, some remembered it fondly, while others used words filled with pain.

I was the first child, the one who suffered the most. I carried all my siblings in my arms, I was the one who took care of everything. At 8 years old, I went to the fields, at 10 years old, I looked after the children, I played house on the edge of the fence (...) Access to water was difficult, I carried a lot of water on my head, we'd go far away to fetch it during the dry season, and they'd dig wells by hand; I'd collect water in gourds, take a bath, and then I had to fill the pot and carry it to my father so he could bathe. (Sueli)

It was a terrible drought, and at the time, we were starving. People said there was no food because of the rain. It wasn't, it was a lack of public policy. And we had a period in our lives when the only saving grace was pigeon peas, but without much seasoning, because we had nothing to buy it with. It was pigeon peas with salt. So, that stuff would get stuck in my mouth, I'd chew it and it wouldn't go down. Today I don't like pigeon peas (...) The offer of food, protein was very scarce, we had some hardships (...) I have this memory, because I felt it firsthand, I lost sisters. (João)

Regarding the protagonists of this study, it is important to emphasize that some of these memories were resignified in adulthood, perceiving the difficulties with ease, and valuing their relationship with nature when compared with everyday city life, especially for those who face long commutes and loneliness due to the distance from their families.

Today I value the land, but back then, I didn't want to, because I was young. (Sueli)

You know what a young woman said to me? That she suffered so much in the North, working in the fields, she suffered so much, faced so many obstacles, that she has no desire to even look at her garden, that she went hungry, in need, two women said that to me (...) The stuff of life, if it were up to me, everything I've been through, I wouldn't do anything, would I? I think we have to forget the past and live in the present, don't you? We have to force these old things out of our heads. Today I've evolved a lot, and I think about what happened. I consider myself a happy person, just because I got this house. Woman, I'm in heaven, if you could see the place I used to live. (Fátima)

Beans with flour, which my kids never ate, and I tell them I ate it a lot. Sometimes there was no rice, during the dry season, there was almost no harvest, no money to buy our own food, so what did we do? My mother made that pile of beans, and we ate them with flour, it was out of necessity. But nowadays, if we make well-seasoned beans with flour, it's delicious, right? (Sueli)

Because this is a community with high levels of social vulnerability and a group made up mostly of older adults living on their pensions, we observed that during the pandemic, they had vulnerable moments of hunger. There were various accounts of how the garden was important to supplement their meals.

Look, I've already eaten carrots, green beans, I've eaten cucumbers, I've eaten so many things from there, parsley. Oh, I haven't even been to the market lately, I'm getting everything from there (laughs). I've already made soup for the kids, with watercress, with the stuff that's there (...). (Fátima)

I've already harvested some plants that I hadn't incorporated into my diet until now. In truth, I don't remember the names of all of them, but I'd never used nasturtium in my diet, or lamb's-ear, or the other ones that are slightly tart, I'd never eaten them. I've been making some really interesting salads, I've shared them with people, I even took them to work today, everyone ate them. (João)

When I see the fridge is empty, kind of like it is now, it's the end of the month, but at least I have chicory there. (Carmen)

In his book *The Geography of Hunger* (1952), Josué de Castro shows us that hunger is a historical phenomenon that manifests itself biologically, but reflects a social and political problem. Thus, it is not unfavorable territorial conditions, natural disasters, or the COVID-19 pandemic that determine whose access to food will be compromised, rather it is political factors that influence the process, including spatial divisions in cities, income distribution, pricing systems, and food production systems.

"Cuisines" are often approached from a territorial perspective, encompassing a territory, such as "rural cuisine," "Sertão cuisine," or "Bahian cuisine" (DE CASTRO et al. 2016). From this perspective, food acts as a marker of identity. Food can also have significant emotional connotations for the individual or group. It can be linked to the ritual of preparation and a history of broad symbolic meaning. According to Boff (1987), human beings derive from food and eating habits other factors relevant to their lives. For Maciel (2001), humans eat around the group they belong to, and these are aspects deeply rooted in family memories.

However, when reflecting on the predilections of their children and grandchildren, these dishes began to lose their prominence in comparison to fast food. Globalization and its rapid standardization of behavior has contributed to changes in eating traditions, causing dietary monotony (DE CASTRO et al. 2016).

My granddaughter likes stroganoff, I don't like it (...) (Carmen)

They don't really value free-range chicken because they prefer the breast. I like the feet, the wings, the neck, the ribs. I don't like breast at all, because I find it a very flavorless, tasteless meat. My son prefers breast. I say, "eat that and leave the carcasses for me" (laughs). (Sueli)

No cookies, I don't eat them, but my grandchildren eat all the junk food there is now. They were used to it with me, but now that they're youngsters, they've changed, but they used to eat everything I made, even soup. I never gave my grandchildren or my children jars of Nestlé soup. I used to blend, soup, you know (...) but these days the kids don't like anything, they only like hamburgers, a ludicrous food, right?! (Fátima)

With the "great transformation" and changes in social organization, interest in the old, the traditional is disappearing. Young people begin to follow a market-driven order, its "monetary nexus" and consumption (POLANYI, 2001). These changes impact eating habits, and the sharing and exchange of knowledges is slowly lost. There is evidence that the influence of this consumer environment has created changes in eating habits, hindering healthy food choices and encouraging inadequate diets (SAWAYA et al. 2013; MAZIERO et al. 2017).

It's like, I see these people, most of them just grab everything and go buy food from the deli counter, that's it. I'm not good with that anymore. I really like the food I make, you know, at home, where I see the seasonings I add, the things I add, it satisfies me even more, you know? Because we don't know what they put in that, there's a lot of industrialized seasoning, that's not good to put on salads, and in food preparation (...) I think real seasoning is garlic, onion, parsley, cilantro (coriander); just like our ancestors, I reckon. (Fátima)

Eating habits in a capitalist society reveal social inequality and dietary monotony. The majority of the Brazilian population lacks access to fresh, high-quality food. For this reason, many families offer their children low-nutrition foods, such as ultra-processed foods, which, paradoxically, are seen as symbolically positive. This is a way for families to show themselves and their peers that they too can access what food companies sell as "good." It is as if these foods translate as affection (ROMANELLI, 2006; GÓES, 2008).

However, anthropologist Da Matta (1981) indicates that food is different from nourishment, since food is an expression of identity, it is cultural, and changes from population to population, while nourishment is what nourishes and keeps people alive. Thus, cooking is an intangible heritage that can generate autonomy and consequently empower people (DIEZ-GARCIA et al. 2011).

Another aspect addressed in the interviews was the differences in taste between generations when the food is regional.

Goat meat is also common, even when my children went to school and said it was from Piauí. Their classmates said, "Oh, you only eat goat meat." They still don't like it, they don't eat it because of that smell. I like to eat *buchada*¹, pork and beef intestines; we ate everything there. They made goat meat *buchada*, lamb *buchada*, even today, I still love lamb and goat. When I go there, my father always buys and kills one for us to eat. (Sueli)

I saw another one on daytime TV, a guy making *dobradinha*, he added cow hoof and black-eyed peas. Even now, I'm thinking about it, but I

1 - Buchada is a dish that is traditional to northeastern Brazil, in which the chopped, seasoned viscera (kidneys, liver, giblets) of a goat or sheep are cooked inside the animal's stomach, the bucho. Dishes with similar preparations, each with their own specific seasonings, include haggis from Scotland, and slatur from Iceland.

haven't made it yet. He [João's son] really liked *dobradinha*, but now he doesn't want to eat it anymore. He likes stroganoff. (João)

It is important to highlight that tradition can be defined as the continuity of past habits, based on the customs of time immemorial. Therefore, culinary tradition is a know-how passed down through generations, not merely knowledge and opinions, but rather human behavior within a given society. Note that the children and grandchildren of the protagonists in this study did not grow up in the same community as them, so despite the culinary tradition of their ancestors, they grew up surrounded by more globalized and, consequently, more standardized references to what constitutes food (REINHARDT, 2007; CORREA et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the interlocutors felt that food consumed in a rural context, close to production and within an extensive or subsistence system, is of higher quality, while they perceived that foods that arrive in the city are almost bland, artificial and unhealthy.

Free-range chicken is what they have there. We raise a lot of free-range chicken and free-range pigs. Free-range pork is very delicious. I don't like these pigs here very much; they're tasteless. I don't know, or maybe it's just me, but they're not very tasty, like freshly slaughtered pigs (...) I want to taste the meat, the fat, because without the fat, it's bland. (Sueli)

I've ground a lot of corn this way, by hand. I'd soak the corn overnight, and when it was fresh, we'd remove it from the cob and grind it to make couscous. Wow, that fresh corn couscous was delicious, I'll never forget it. (Sueli)

Among the numerous forms of identity and eating habits, a traditionally strong aspect of culture is that of territory, "geographic food" (MONTANARI, 2006). This food identity is strongly associated with an element of nature, but in contemporary times, the process of globalization tends to dilute cultural diversities (ALMEIDA, 2017).

When it came to food, another characteristic that was highlighted is the emotional bond behind the dishes.

My mom used to make a *feijãozinho* [mom's homecooked beans], rice, with free-range chicken, it was very tasty, and up North, we called on Maria Isabela, she made it so good. Here I try to make it, but it doesn't have quite the same flavor (laughs). It doesn't have that taste like my mom and grandma used to make. Pork scratchings are also something I remember very well (...) Up North, we would slaughter the pig and save that pile of bacon. Every time we cooked, we would add a little bit to extract the fat, right? She'd toss those pork scratchings in the flour there (...) it was a feast, it was so good. I still think it's good, but I can't eat them because of gastritis. (Sueli)

As a child, I ate summer squash my aunt made, pasta, rice, beans with zucchini (courgette) and banana. I still remember it, banana with food (...) I like everything, chayote. Chilli peppers are a must, but I can't eat them. My mother taught me how to make chili peppers; she loved them, and I do it for her. Even today, I still like them, but I can't eat them. (Lúcia)

The happiness I remember is when I lived with my husband. He made a lot of mayonnaise salads, with potatoes, carrots, he even added beets (...) Every time I make it, I think of him and it brings me joy, because we lived together, very well. I lived with him for 20 years. (Fátima)

We observed a sense of community-oriented organization in moments of sharing and donating food from the garden to those who did not attend it or contribute to its maintenance. It was as if the food they produced and shared was a testament to the space's potential, as if they wanted to reassure everyone that having a community garden in the condominium was worthwhile.

The garden represents food for everyone. Everyone eats from that garden, miss, those cherry tomatoes were a hit here. Tomatoes and cilantro (coriander); people up north like cilantro, they're not big on parsley, but everyone comes, "Dona Fátima, don't you have any cilantro?" I say, "no, we're going to plant it, it's just the beginning, but you'll see all this beautiful stuff one day. This here is the beginning." (Fátima)

From these accounts, it is clear that a person's motivation to consume and/or engage in the search for a particular food is influenced by diverse and intricate factors. These factors may be socioeconomic, the availability of time, ease of access and cost, cultural issues, regional sociability, food preferences, culinary skills, and so on. However, the relevance of affective memories from childhood and youth in the relationship between "taste" and flavors of food was a common denominator among all the interlocutors. Furthermore, memory and the food's freshness and the nostalgic feeling of working with the land somehow drove these people to seek a renewal in the garden.

Socialization

Aging can be considered a demographic phenomenon. In 2017, 56% of the older adult population was women (IBGE, 2018). Adequate support for older women is of great importance, and the formulation of public policies for this vulnerable group should be a priority, since the risks for this group stem from the feminization of poverty (RESTREPO et al. 1994).

When they are no longer considered fit to work, older adults can often suffer from depression, as the interruption of their activities contributes to a loss of identity. In addition, older adults may experience physical exhaustion and a greater propensity for morbidities, such that these natural limitations make it difficult to perform activities they

had normally done before, altering their routine and the practice of pleasurable activities. To exacerbate this already worrying situation, families are becoming increasingly smaller, which can heighten feelings of loneliness (HORTA et al. 2010).

And I wasn't working and when I'm not working, my head gets really bad, I start to get anxious, so I thought: I want to get into this garden to clear my head as well, because I'm really stressed at home not doing anything. (Sueli)

If the daily routine of a large urban center, with its long commutes and resulting many hours away from home, makes it difficult for people to interact with one another, community gardens offer social experiences that change the way we experience the city, promoting collective interaction and an exchange of experiences. This coexistence with different people fosters the creation and strengthening of bonds of trust and solidarity, since working together fosters a unity based on mutual support that goes beyond individual benefit (BIAZOTI et al. 2022).

Sometimes I'd come home from work in such a rush, I'd stop by, look at the plants, and if there was anything there, I'd pick it. (Sueli)

When I'm cleaning the garden, someone I know always passes by and I offer them something. There's always something to offer: a few stalks of parsley, an eggplant (aubergine), a cucumber. It's important to have contact with the earth, to have a space to watch plants grow, to see fruit begin to grow, to be able to share food with neighbors. It's also therapeutic, in a society that crushes people, this thing of rushing to work, catching the bus, catching whatever, arriving at work, returning home, the routine (...) the garden also serves as a pause: taking a break, doing something different, an escape from the routine. It's been very good. (João)

Initially, because the group that tends the garden was small, they felt discouraged, as few people cared about improving the common area. A study of cancer survivors showed that out of a population of approximately 10,000 participants, only 1% participated in the garden (BAIL et al., 2018). At that time, were it not for the incentive to materialize the space due to the research, the group would probably not have survived. However, as the months passed and the garden took shape, a sense of credibility awoke within the group and among other residents. People began to praise the space and value the initiative. This made the group more receptive to residents who "harvest but don't tend it" and the children who "stopped destroying the green space." In this sense, observations showed that even people who did not actively engage in the maintenance contributed sporadic help by watering, weeding, donating and exchanging seedlings or seeds, and offering suggestions on how to improve the cultivation and structure of the garden, on so on, generating socialization involving the garden.

A study conducted in California, USA, indicates that the increase in fresh produce

consumption went beyond accessibility, it also reflected pride in their gardens (PALAR et al., 2019).

A resident told me, "I see everyone picking, but we don't." I said, "Oh? But you can pick, it's a community thing, there's no such thing as some picking and others don't." (Fátima)

I really like this idea. People can't lose sight of the fact that they're capable of doing something. So, doing the gardening, getting involved in something that you plant, you produce, you do the cooking (...)
(João)

When the group gathered, there was an exchange of knowledge, support in difficult times, and relaxation. These are crucial aspects for anyone, but they gain relevance in a senior citizen group. The plants and folklore often fueled rich exchanges and new learning, as well as reinforcing a sense of belonging within society.

Someone would come (referring to neighbors), "Oh my God, my son is sick, where am I going to buy this thing?" [or] "Oh, my son needs syrup." I had lemon balm, I had yarrow, I had pennyroyal, mint, epazote, everything you can imagine. I'd get it on the street, and ask women on the street, as I still do today. I'd collect the seedlings and bring them back, and I'd also bring back and plant those beautiful, colorful leaves. I already knew their uses because my dad told me, this is for this, this is for that. Sometimes women would come and say, "Oh, Dona Fátima, I brought this medicine here, that's from Bahia, plant it (...) this here is for stomach ache, this here is for earache." So, I'd plant it. When women came and said, "I have a sick child," I'd say, "give them this," like elderberry, which was for chickenpox. (Fátima)

Green spaces in urban areas are crucial, as they encourage social relationships and interactions in natural, healthy contexts (BOFFI et al., 2021). In a study conducted at the primary health center in Embu das Artes, São Paulo, the participating women indicated that they enjoyed the meeting space and the camaraderie there, such that the collective work led to the formation of friendships (MONTEIRO et al., 2015).

Socialization did not only engender strengthening in the group. As the months passed and the children grew closer, there was a generational exchange with benefits for both sides. We witnessed fun through games between adults and children, the care taken in teaching the correct way to care for plants, and a genuine interest from the youngsters in learning from their elders.

From that time in Pernambuco, I remember the games; our relationship revolved largely around playing in the woods. There were no toys, it was either something we improvised or something made of clay. This abundance of toys, this choice that we have here in the city,

we didn't have there. So, the relationship was running through the woods, it was playing, going out for a walk and eating *batata colé*. (João)

Some studies point to cost-effective public health evidence related to social interaction among older adults, treatment for anxiety and depression, the promotion of physical activity, weight reduction, healthy food choices, and the environmental impact of improving the urban environment (ROCKSTRÖM et al., 2009). In this sense, community gardens can contribute to public health, since in addition to providing access to fresh food, they encourage social connection and the reclaiming of memories, which can be defined as “the sense of belonging and subjective psychological bond that people feel in relation to individuals and groups of others” and the environment in which they live (HASLAM et al., 2015). It is important for public health professionals to pay close attention to the narratives and accounts produced in this sphere, since community gardens can be spaces that generate beneficial effects on health and well-being, particularly regarding “their sense of social connectedness” (GLOVER, 2021).

Overall, it was clear that the garden activities provided a moment of socialization and activity for the older adults, in addition to providing them with a sense of purpose. Moreover, the garden was highlighted as a key factor in healthy eating and its contribution to the household budget, which made participants feel more committed to continuing to use the garden even after the researchers' departure.

Final considerations

When analyzing the motivation for installing the community garden and its meaning for the research participants, we observed that prior exposure to gardening practices was a relevant factor, since the garden helped to recover and reframe affective memories from childhood and youth. Along with the reclaiming of memories, participants also reported the importance of the sense of socialization created around the garden, which extended to other residents and visitors to the condominium.

For the children, the garden activities provided a certain familiarity and interest in healthy foods, generating memories of contact with the land and nature. This experience can be a great ally in nutritional education practices.

The participants' narratives also revealed that the community garden can contribute, albeit incipiently, to improving the participants' diets, whether through the addition of salads or extra meals. From this perspective, this study indicates that the community garden has become an ally in improving quality of life, contributing to a certain level of empowerment for residents, a locus for the recovery of cultural and food values and socialization, and as a tool for the nutritional education of adults and children.

However, due to the limitations of this study—a short-term experiment with only a few engaged residents and a small growing area—we cannot affirm that the garden contributed significantly to the budget of the families in the condominium. Though some residents did mention that they turned to the garden to prepare meals during critical mo-

ments during the pandemic or at the end of the month when the family budget was low.

NOTE:

Translation by Philip Badiz.

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The datasets related to this article will be available upon request from the corresponding author.

“A Roça na Cidade”: Horta Comunitária e engajamento em uma Comunidade Vulnerável

Aline Oliveira Zoia do Amaral
Regina Yoshie Matsue
Luciana Yuki Tomita

Resumo: O presente estudo analisou a implantação da horta comunitária num condomínio de Heliópolis, bairro de alta vulnerabilidade social em São Paulo, e a motivação dos participantes. Um estudo de caso engajado e reflexivo, que, por meio da observação participante, diário de campo e entrevistas semiestruturadas, reuniu material para análise, considerando a vigilância epistemológica. Implantou-se a horta a partir da vaquinha virtual. A horta contribuiu com o orçamento doméstico, ampliou a variedade das hortaliças consumidas como as plantas alimentícias não convencionais e melhorou a alimentação. Além disso, tornou-se um espaço de resgate das memórias afetivas, socialização, ocupação para as idosas e aproximação das crianças do condomínio com a prática de cultivo de alimentos. A horta comunitária pode ser uma estratégia importante para promoção da saúde e de mitigação da insegurança alimentar.

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Artigo Original

Palavras-chave: Horta comunitária; insegurança alimentar; socialização; agricultura urbana e periurbana; significado dos alimentos.

“El rancho en la ciudad”: huerto comunitario y compromiso en una comunidad vulnerable

Aline Oliveira Zoia do Amaral
Regina Yoshie Matsue
Luciana Yuki Tomita

Resumen: El estudio analizó la implantación de una huerta comunitaria en un condominio en Heliópolis; un barrio de alta vulnerabilidad social en São Paulo, y motivación de los participantes. Se utilizó un enfoque de estudio de caso comprometido y reflexivo; en cual se recopiló datos a través de observación participante; diario de campo y entrevistas semiestructuradas; considerando la vigilancia epistemológica. La huerta se estableció mediante una colecta virtual de fondos. La huerta contribuyó al presupuesto familiar; amplió la variedad de vegetales consumidos, así como plantas alimenticias no convencionales y mejoró la alimentación. Además; se convirtió en un espacio para rescatar memorias afectivas; promover la socialización y ofrecer ocupación para los adultos mayores; así como acerca a los niños del condominio a la práctica del cultivo de alimentos. El jardín comunitario puede ser una estrategia importante para promover la salud y mitigar la inseguridad alimentaria.

Palabras-clave: Huerta comunitaria; inseguridad alimentaria; socialización; agricultura urbana y periurbana.

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