Urban agriculture is a key strategy of the Venezuelan government under President Hugo Chávez to increase the food supply, fight poverty, recover urban spaces and reduce the environmental effects of agrochemicals. Thanks to government support and the active participation of organized communities, this public policy has flourished in recent years. This fact sheet describes the most important aspects of urban agriculture in Venezuela as an approach to establishing food sovereignty.

**Historical Context: From Agriculture to Oil**

Although Venezuela is currently known as one of the world’s top oil producers and exporters, agriculture was the country’s main economic activity for more than four centuries. In the 1800s, the principal exports were coffee and cocoa, and Venezuela was 70 percent rural, with slow economic growth and a population of less than 2 million.

Changes came with the oil boom in early 20th century; by 1925, oil had displaced coffee as the main export product, and by 1928 Venezuela was the biggest oil producer in the world. Although agriculture still represented 22 percent of the GDP and 60 percent of the labor force in 1935, the oil sector grew steadily. In subsequent years, Venezuela became a net food importer, and the rural population went from 35 percent in 1960 to just 6 percent today. By 2003, agriculture represented only 6 percent of the GDP. Venezuela currently has a population of 28.9 million inhabitants, 64 percent of which live in urban areas.

**Endogenous Development for Food Sovereignty**

Based on these principles, in the wake of the oil sabotage in 2002 and 2003 that jeopardized the food supply, the Venezuelan government turned to endogenous development as part of its productive strategy to construct a diversified economy that favors human wellbeing, the environment and culture. Endogenous development refers to development from within, based on local criteria to create proposals for satisfying local needs through community participation and the revitalization of culture.

Meanwhile, new emphasis has been placed on the ancestral knowledge and practices of farming communities and traditionally rural indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and programs have been implemented that favor family-based and collective agriculture at a small and medium scale. This policy is reflected in the increased availability of agricultural credits, which jumped from $164 million in 1999 to $7.6 billion in 2008. Paradoxically, funds allocated to the country’s agricultural development come from oil revenues.

**Urban Agriculture as a Government Policy**

Venezuela’s experiment with urban agriculture began in 2003 as part of an agreement with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and the government took up this project in earnest in 2009 in response to...
the global food crisis, establishing the Foundation for Training and Innovation to Support the Agricultural Revolution (CIARA) with support from the Republic of Cuba.

By late 2009, 191 agricultural production units were created, mainly in the capital city of Caracas. In 2011, the program got a boost from the creation of the Great Mission AgroVenezuela, a national socio-productive program to stimulate agricultural production. Its aims include “strengthening urban agriculture as a new scheme of food mass production in cities.” Through CIARA, which is under the Ministry of Agriculture, a new program called “Agro Ciudad” was created to produce food in urban and suburban areas.

Environmental Sustainability in Cities

“Agro Ciudad” helps take advantage of idle lands by coordinating, designing, and applying actions to improve the quality of life of the population. The program has transformed schoolyards, outdoor spaces near offices, buildings, squares, houses and abandoned public areas to put them to use in food production and improve the appearance of cities. Since 2009, over 26 million square feet of idle land has been used for food production.

Promoting a Local Solidarity Economy

As of May of 2012, surplus production through “Agro Ciudad” goes to local markets so that residents can buy fresh vegetables and boost the community’s economy. These markets also articulate actions with other productive initiatives through networks of food sales and distribution. Three tons of healthy foods are sold at fair prices each week in these local markets, which eliminate intermediaries and pass savings of 50 to 70 percent on to customers. These markets also provide a space for cultural activities surrounding urban agriculture.

Harvesting the Rewards of Urban Agriculture

With an investment of $44 billion, Venezuela currently produces onion, peppers, leeks, basil, celery, eggplant, zucchini, cucumber, cilantro, lettuce, tomato, radish, beets and green beans at a low cost in urban gardens. By July 2012, 25,000 units of agricultural production, including family, community, institutional and school gardens, were opened in 10 priority states throughout the country (Anzoátegui, Aragua, Carabobo, the Capital District, Lara, Miranda, Monagas, Táchira, Vargas and Zulia). Food production in urban areas increased from 457 tons in 2009 to 6,340 tons in May 2012.

Thanks in part to the government’s food and agriculture policies, average annual food consumption in Venezuela has increased by 25 percent over the last 12 years, jumping from 873.7 pounds of food per person consumed in 1999 to 1,102 pounds per person in 2010.
The Venezuelan government has a social vision of the food sector: food is not merchandise, but rather, a fundamental human right. That’s why it has developed independent and sovereign food policies forecasting scenarios of a global food crisis and the use of food as political weapon by opposition sectors, which promote hoarding, smuggling and speculation. Urban agriculture has become a tool of food sovereignty that is becoming popular in Venezuela and strengthens families and communities.

SOURCES:
14. “El proyecto de desarrollo y consolidación de la agricultura urbana”, Fundación CIARA.
15. “Entrevista a Martha Bolívar”, Aporrea.