CLAG Final Research Report

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**Project:**  Marginalized communities' reliance on urban agriculture threatened by a 'sustainable' Medellín[[1]](#footnote-1)

The objectives of this research were to better understand in the political, economic, and environmental contexts in which displaced women in Medellín, Colombia, cope with food insecurity. In particular, this fieldwork focused on the agency of displaced women practicing urban agriculture and the impact of wider structural influences on their food insecurity coping strategies. My research this summer revealed a salient tension between the urban agricultural practices of marginalized communities and the sustainability planning agenda of the city.

CLAG funding enabled me to spend most of July 2015 in Medellín, Colombia, conducting focus groups with 30 displaced women living in marginalized communities on the periphery of the city. This fieldwork was following up on 2.5 months of fieldwork in Medellín in 2014 and was very informative for both my dissertation and post-doctoral research. During this time, I conducted five focus groups – four with 5 women each, and a fifth that after touring urban gardens melded two groups of five into one of 10. The four groups of five met at a community organization in the center for town, while the larger group was at a participant’s home high up the hillside. I also used the qualitative GIS technique of sketch mapping during the meetings which offered insight into important spaces for procuring food, meeting daily needs, and holding community meetings in their neighborhoods. Finally, I was able to talk with three community leaders about the broader context of urban planning in Medellín, which is in flux as a result of local elections this fall.

The research funds ($1,300) were used to offset expenses for room and board in Medellín for 21 days ($678), local transportation by subway ($33), and compensation for focus group participants ($461). The participants in this research have very little, if any, income and require compensation for the travel expenses incurred to get to the interview site as well as time spent participating in the research (and thus not spent meeting other needs such as getting food). As such, I provided each participant with COP40,000 (approximately US$20) to offset some of these expenses. Because of a more favorable exchange rate in Colombia this summer, I was also able to use some of the CLAG research funds to secure community space for holding the five focus group discussions ($128).

Driven by participants’ interest in discussing their urban gardens, my research focused on the relationship between the powerful urban sustainability agenda of the government and the urban agriculture practices of less powerful, marginalized communities. Urban agriculture is gaining increased attention in both the global north and south as a means for productively using vacant space, sourcing local and organic foods, and supporting livelihoods in marginalized communities. At the same time, ‘progressive’ cities such as Medellín, Colombia, tout principles of urban sustainability as they seek greater international investment. In cities where land is at a premium, such as Medellín, the urban agriculture and sustainability agendas often find themselves in competition.

In Medellín, displaced women living in poverty seek to farm land in their neighborhoods on the edge of town in order to survive. More than 200,000 displaced people live in Medellín, with more arriving every day. Women displaced from the countryside experience high rates of poverty, marginalization, and food insecurity. In Colombia, women are directly impacted in multiple ways by war and displacement – as targets of violence, as victims of sexual aggression, as part of networks (family, friends, communities) that are shattered, and as targets of sexual violence or restricted freedom. Women are the heads of household in 46% of displaced families in Colombia, compared to 28% in the non-displaced population. As a result of significant marginalization, poverty, and food insecurity, a majority of displaced women find themselves having to undertake new strategies to obtain enough food for their families, such as growing food in limited spaces available near their homes. One neighborhood of informal settlements was able to gain a lease from the government to build urban gardens in open space near their homes. There are small garden plots for 40 families that enable them to grow a variety of foods for consumption, exchange, and sale. Most of the women in this neighborhood that had a garden reported much less difficulty with food insecurity. And they are pleased with the food that they can grow particularly because it is of good quality and grown without chemicals. Importantly, it also continues to foster the connection to the land that they lost when they were displaced from the countryside. These gardens are an important lifeline because excess food can be exchanged with neighbors and neighborhood stores to get products that can’t be grown in this environment such as rice, sugar, and oil. Some women even have enough excess food to exchange with a food bank in order to get toothpaste and shampoo. Finally, some women are able to sell their excess food at a market downtown to gain income to cover other essential needs such as paying for electricity. These gardens are a tremendous survival strategy for this community.

Yet the land for the gardens is threatened by the city’s planning of a greenbelt in the name of sustainability. This greenbelt is part of the city’s social urbanism planning agenda that seeks to attract foreign investment by transforming public space and mass transit in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. One part of the social urbanism agenda pursued by the city government seeks to make the city a more beautiful place to live, which includes halting the growth of informal settlements on the mountain side. The greenbelt, characterized by a 72-km corridor of greenspace, seeks to do just this by building gardens, footpaths, and other open space around the edges of the city. The project also supports the city’s sustainability agenda through protecting water basins and forests around the city in order to reduce pollution and protect biodiversity. However, the project has been critiqued by community members (and scholars) for not being attentive to its impact on the most vulnerable populations in the city. The plan threatens to displace these residents diminishing social cohesion, recognition of community rights and dignity, and livelihoods. In several neighborhoods practicing urban agriculture, leases for their land are also under threat as they overlap with land designated for the greenbelt.

The findings from this fieldwork will contribute to my dissertation as well as post-doctoral research on the relationship between urban sustainability planning and urban agriculture. All of the women participating in the research had urban gardens which ended up dominating much of the focus group discussion. Drawing on this research and political ecology scholarship, my post-doctoral research agenda will investigate competition in urban land use between powerful environmental sustainability agendas and urban agriculture practices of less powerful, marginalized communities. Funding from CLAG enabled this bridging research to complete my dissertation fieldwork and start new research. It also greatly supported my efforts to foster relationships of trust with community members and organizations in Medellín enabling future research in the city. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to CLAG for its integral support of this research.

1. This title has been changed to better reflect the outcomes of this research. The original title was “Connecting for survival: Understanding the spatial implications of migrant women’s survival strategies in Medellín, Colombia”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)