Urban Agriculture and Food Sovereignty in Cochabamba, Bolivia

Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to examine the ways in which small scale food production activities in the Cochabamba Valley of Bolivia impact the Food Sovereignty outcomes of the communities that practice them. Although there is no universally accepted definition, the concept of Food Sovereignty typically includes the political and cultural rights of communities to define the structure and policy of their own food system. The concept has gained significance in international food policy discourse.

Cochabamba was chosen because of the researcher’s previous experience there and because of the region’s importance as the agricultural center of Bolivia. The Andean region of the Bolivian highlands is home to an incredible biodiversity of food crops. For example over one thousand varieties of potatoes and tubers exist in the region, many of which are virtually unknown elsewhere. These crops and the innumerous traditional methods developed to grow, harvest, process, and store them in the harsh climactic conditions of the Andes, are essential to Bolivian food security. In addition to its rich agricultural heritage, Cochabamba has become a focal point for innovation in food policy. The city was chosen by the Organization of American States as the location for adoption of the June 2012 “Declaration of Cochabamba on Food Security with Sovereignty in the Americas.” Additionally Bolivia’s 2012 law on the rights of “Mother Earth” represents a radical new approach to environmental policy.

In the context of these traditions and innovations, Bolivia faces many of the challenges of a rapidly developing country, including urbanization and sprawl, migration, deteriorating environmental conditions, water pollution, dropping water tables, and widespread malnutrition. Despite Bolivia’s historical resistance to the forces of globalization, it is becoming integrated into a globalized food chain that favors monocultures over crop diversity and export
varieties over traditional varieties. This may threaten local food sovereignty. This project set out to explore the activities of food producers in Cochabamba and how they impact food sovereignty.

Research Methods

Multiple qualitative research methods were employed to collect data and to triangulate for validity. Methods include document review, participant observation, transect walks, organizational visits, and expert and key informant interviews. Subjects were chosen through purposeful selection, including convenience and snowball sampling methods, to maximize time and financial resources. Tulane IRB approval was obtained to conduct semi-structured surveys with households that practice urban agriculture in Cochabamba. Regrettably, the primary contact in the community was unable to proceed, and the household level surveys were not conducted. Despite this change from the original proposal, interviews were conducted at the organizational level, and they resulted in high quality data.

A number of key informant and expert interviews were conducted, and data was collected covering NGO practices and urban agriculture in Cochabamba. Local contacts were established through Payson Center faculty Martín Mendoza-Botelho, along with contacts from the Foundation for Sustainable Development, those identified through independent desk research, and referrals from contacts made in-country. The organizations and sites included university research centers, local nongovernmental organizations, regional and local markets, and final places of food sale. A complete list of sites can be found in Appendix 1. In Appendix 2, a graphic model depicts some of the actors and relationships in the local food system.

Findings and Potential for Future Research

Despite the limitations of the study and the inability to carry out household surveys, a number of key research findings were made. These findings may prove useful for practitioners or policy makers in Bolivia, and they can provide a useful starting point for future research. Key research findings:

- Knowledge of existing urban agriculture practices among research centers is not widespread. Some university centers and organizations assume that agriculture in the urban context is limited and focus extensively on the rural context.
Among organizations that do work in the urban context, knowledge of urban agriculture that does exist is often not shared between organizations.

Nongovernmental grassroots organizations in Cochabamba place a primary focus on environment and climate change.

Those that focus on urban agriculture incorporate an educational mission (ex., school gardens). Focus is placed on general education and empowerment skills rather than on preserving traditional techniques or food varieties.

Urban agriculture projects are in place on a small scale and are being pursued by new organizations, but challenges remain. Challenges include:

- Long-term impact monitoring;
- Follow-up to ensure that school gardens are maintained;
- Coordination between groups;
- Achieving community support and buy-in.
- Continued funding uncertain, especially in the case of foreign-funded organizations. For example, funding organizations from the Netherlands are changing their development priorities.

In a wider agricultural and food sovereignty context, crop choice among commercial farmers is demand-driven, rather than intended to protect traditional varieties. However some organizations are working to change demand, for example potato chips made from traditional potatoes varieties.

Many crops are considered only appropriate for household self-consumption, while others are grown more specifically for urban markets or export markets. The controversial case of quinoa represents a traditional and nutritious crop grown mainly for export. While this provides livelihoods, it also raises the price for local buyers.

Water access continues to be a major issue for food producers in the area, both in quantity and quality. The Cochabamba “Water Wars” from 2000 are the most striking example of this.

There is a great potential for future research. As stated previously, the semi-structured survey tool was not used at the individual level, and thus provides one opportunity. Another potential research path would be to explore Bolivia’s recent environmental legislation on the “Rights of Mother Earth” as a case of how rights-based legislation affects Food Sovereignty.

I intend to further explore the Food Sovereignty framework as a guiding framework for future research and my doctoral dissertation. The findings from the Bolivian case study may be utilized as a part of a comparative study against a case in another country.
### Appendix 1: Research Sites from Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Site</th>
<th>Type of Site</th>
<th>Research Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universidad Mayor de San Simon – CESU</td>
<td>University – Department</td>
<td>Key Informant Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universidad Mayor de San Simon – AGRUCO</td>
<td>University – Research Center</td>
<td>Site Visits, Key Informant Interviews, Desk Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for the Hungry</td>
<td>NGO – Faith Based</td>
<td>Site Visits, Household Visits, Key Informant Interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Granjo Model Pairumani</td>
<td>NGO – Organic Farm, Research Center</td>
<td>Site Visits, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaia Pacha</td>
<td>NGO – Environmental Education, Empowerment</td>
<td>Key Informant Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NME Mundial</td>
<td>NGO – Gardening, Education, Organic Farm</td>
<td>Participant Observation, Key Informant Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGRECOL Andes</td>
<td>NGO – Research</td>
<td>Desk Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundcion PROINPA</td>
<td>NGO – Research</td>
<td>Desk Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papa Andina</td>
<td>NGO – Research</td>
<td>Desk Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMO Control</td>
<td>NGO - Certification</td>
<td>Desk Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punata Agriculture and Livestock Market</td>
<td>Public Market</td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
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<tr>
<td>La Cancha, Cochabamba</td>
<td>Public Market</td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco-Feria, Cochabamba</td>
<td>Public Market, Organic and Natural Foods</td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Restaurants, Stores</td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Graphical Depiction of Organizations and Intended Outcomes
Appendix 3: Selected Bibliography for Bolivian Food Sovereignty Studies


