

BOLIVIA: The Art of Collaboration for Healthy Diets

In Bolivia, urbanization is affecting food systems – and people are suffering from unhealthy diets. Stakeholders from all sectors are now working together along the entire food chain to establish regional markets. And suddenly the cities are not part of the problem, but part of the solution.



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When a healthy diet becomes a struggle

Bolivia is a country that looks back on a rich agricultural history, on various ecosystems. And it is among the first countries in the world to have enshrined the Right to Food in their constitution in 2009. However, over the years, the effects of climate change and massive migration of the rural population to the country's emerging metropolitan regions (La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz) have made food production challenging. "Something is not right," says María Chuquimia, a small-scale farmer from Lorocota 10 kilometers north east of the city of La Paz, who brings her vegetable harvest to the city. "We are still isolated from urban markets because roads and transportation systems are bad. And when we reach the city, we hardly find spaces where we can sell our products."

It seems like a paradox: Close to 80 percent of the country's population now lives in cities, yet rural producers don't find ways to connect to urban buyers. This megatrend of urbanization is affecting food systems in profound ways. Healthy and local food has been pushed back, and instead ultra-processed and high-fat industrial food is spreading. Agriculture is increasingly dominated by export-oriented monocultures such as soy and sunflowers. The consequence of this trend: "Approximately 17 percent of the total population do not have access to a healthy, diversified diet," says María Teresa Nogales from the Welthungerhilfe partner Fundación Alternativas. "And on top of that, nearly 60 percent are overweight or even obese, which is becoming a public health problem". One face of poverty is a diet of cheap and unhealthy calories. And the government with the country's constitution? Nogales: "It has long shown non-commitment."

Action taken: We need to talk

Founded in 2013, Fundación Alternativa's goal is to use political advocacy to influence decision-makers to transform food systems towards greater resilience and sustainability. To do this, they established a roundtable which brings together various stakeholders like local politicians, nutritionists, architects and consumers from the two-million-strong conurbation of La Paz. When Welthungerhilfe joined the cooperation, they introduced the concept of Multi-Actor Platforms (MAP) extending the committee to further players from civil society, to the business sector, government and academia. "This brought new ideas to the table," says co-founder and Director Nogales.

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The new alliance now engages in social advocacy to raise awareness and gather citizen support as well as in public education campaigns. And in a further extension of networking, farmer María Chuquimia also came to the round table. She and other women complained about the water in Lorocota being polluted by illegal mining and about their difficulties in finding appropriate sales channels for their produce. But she has also learned something: “My participation showed me that I shouldn’t be embarrassed to raise my voice,” she says.

As a result of the platform discussions, farming women like Chuquimia were offered the chance to engage in direct marketing channels established by municipalities and invited to mobile fairs. “It’s a win-win situation,” says Nogales. “It creates justice for the producers and affordable prices for consumers.” And healthy food on the plates. The MAP not only strengthened the linkage between rural and urban food systems, but also promoted urban agriculture. This in turn broadened the range of healthy and freshly offered food on markets that were designed together with urban planners and authorities in the MAP.

A systemic strengthening of the food systems

The increased activation of all stakeholders in the food systems raised general awareness of the need for healthy food for all. The government has undergone a change of awareness and is not only concerned about putting something on the plate, but also about the quality of food. All issues relating to resilient food supply chains are now a central part of the political discourse in Bolivia, which included María Chuquimia. “My voice was translated into public policy,” she says. And Nogales adds: “At every level of government, you can see our proposals being incorporated.” All of this has promoted sustainable, healthy alternatives and ensured access to nutritious food.

Lessons learned

- **The human Right to Food is not only achieved through political advocacy,** but also by convincing a critical mass of participants of its necessity and meaningfulness. Social advocacy as a support measure raises awareness on topics around food security and thus increases the opportunities to influence policy.
- **Once established, Multi-Actor Platforms work not only to address food insecurity,** but also issues such as environmental degradation, economic development or tourism. As a system, they are scalable.
- **To ensure a good functionality of these platforms, the process needs regular and predictable meetings.** To remain inclusive, marginalized stakeholders such as small-scale farmers need to get a seat at the table and financial support to participate. The platforms should never get politicized. Being inclusive also means welcoming different opinions.



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**María Teresa Nogales,
Co-founder and Director of Fundación Alternativas:**

The Municipal Food Security Committees in Bolivia, led by Fundación Alternativas, have fostered collaborative working environments dedicated to transforming local and metropolitan food systems in a transparent and interdisciplinary manner. These multi-stakeholder groups have generated numerous policy proposals, research initiatives and innovations that have, in turn, significantly impacted the actions of various stakeholders, including government, academia, the private sector, cooperation agencies, and others, in advancing the Right to Food.

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