

Using Urban Agriculture to Address Food Insecurity in La Paz, Bolivia



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Project Overview

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Location: La Paz, Bolivia

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Fellowship Duration: May 24 – July 23, 2016



About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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Fellowship Overview

During our time in Bolivia with Fundación Alternativas, our work focused on urban food security in the large metropolitan city of La Paz. Our objective while working with Fundación Alternativas was to help them advance their work to overcome issues surrounding urban food security in La Paz with a specific focus on agriculture. Some of the major issues surrounding urban food security in La Paz include not only improving access to affordable food but also nutritionally diverse foods. Nutritionally diverse foods can be especially difficult and expensive to find in La Paz because of cultural and geographical considerations.

Background/Context

Geographically, La Paz is located at approximately 3,700 meters above sea level and, as a result, has a desert like climate during the dry season with infertile soil and harsh temperature changes at night. During the rainy season, La Paz often suffers from too much precipitation which can flood crops, lead to landslides, and hinder transportation of food crops to areas of need. As a result, farmers face harsh growing conditions in which they rely on a few key staple crops such as potatoes and onions because they feel confident these plants will prosper in the harsh conditions. The problem created then is an over saturation of staple crops, such as potatoes and onions, on the market creating a decrease in the price of these goods and resulting in lower income for the farmers. Furthermore, crops such as potatoes and onions have limited nutritional value but make up large portions of local diets. This has even created problems of obesity, as many local diets are unbalanced and largely consist of carbs with limited other nutritional options. Culturally, an issue that emerges is an aversion to growing more nutritionally diverse crops as well as growing crops during the dry season. This is because for centuries the local population has subsisted off of growing the same staple crops. This aversion to trying to grow new crops and use new farming techniques hinders the efforts to encourage a more nutritionally diverse diet.

Activities

Our time with Fundación Alternativas was spent doing multiple activities. Three days a week were spent in the urban farm doing manual labor to improve and maintain the infrastructure of the different community member parcels. Some of the things that we built included a pavilion-like structure from sheet metal and salvaged wood, new fences and gates to keep stray dogs from digging up the plants, a greenhouse made of recycled water bottles, as well as a fair bit of painting. Furthermore, we worked with the organization to share information with the community about the benefits of urban gardening. We helped in hosting local schools and

community groups as well as with the preparation and organization for a ‘friendship day’ on the farm. The ‘friendship day’ allowed the families who had parcels on the farm to gather and share ideas with one another as well as participate in team building exercises. One exercise consisted of asking other members of the farm a question and then answering other members’ questions. The themes of questions ranged from farming methods, successes and failures of certain crops, and recipes and cooking tips to the personal and community benefits of belonging to the farm. The overwhelming sentiment of the members was that cultivating in the farm not only brings fresh and nutritious food to their families but also a much greater sense of community, new friendships, and a safe space to enjoy the outdoors and escape the pressures of city life. During



‘friendship day’ we also helped give three separate cooking demonstrations in which we created nutritionally diverse dishes from the products of the farm intended to inspire members with new ideas of how to incorporate their crops into their meals. The knowledge sharing and reflection that took place on ‘friendship day’ was a way for us to witness the direct positive effect that the farm has on its members as expressed by the members themselves.

Finally, the remaining time was spent in the office at Fundación Alternativas.

During our days at the office, we conducted research and ultimately created three separate policy briefs all relating to urban food security and agriculture in La Paz. Each policy brief had a specific focus: one covered the economics behind urban food security, another looked at the environmental aspects of food security, and the final policy brief looked at the role of urban planning for food security with regard to agricultural practices in La Paz and Bolivia at large. The purpose of these policy briefs was to further awareness both politically and socially about the issues faced in La Paz and Bolivia surrounding urban food security. We were then given the opportunity to share some of our research by giving a presentation to the Municipal Committee on Food Security of La Paz, a monthly round table discussion attended by different stakeholders in the food system.

Challenges and Successes

Initially when heading to La Paz Bolivia to work with Fundación Alternativas we knew only that our work would consist of a “hands on” field component working in the NGO’s urban garden,

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and that we would also be conducting research in the organization's headquarters. The specific details of what exactly our work would entail were to be decided once we were able to meet in person with our organization, so that we could decide how to best optimize our time in country by doing work which fit each of our individual talents and areas of expertise. Once we met with our organization we established what each of our goals would be during our time in country. Those goals being to first conduct research on urban food security in Bolivia, in regards to each of our specific academic focuses (urban systems, environment, economics), and to then prepare a presentation for the Municipal Committee on Food Security of La Paz. Second, we were to further our individual research, based on our academic focuses, and we were to each create our own individual policy briefs that our host organization could use and present to other organizations and government officials. The intended goal of these policy briefs was to help advocate our host organization's programs, work, and policies, while educating the local populous on each policy brief's respective focus. Our third and final objective was to use half of our time, when we were not in the office, working in the urban garden created by our host organization.

We were able to accomplish all of our three assigned objectives: 1) we conducted research and presented our findings at the Municipal Committee on Food Security of La Paz; 2) we furthered our research after our presentation and we each completed our individual policy briefs; 3) we spent half of our time working at the urban garden, working with local staff and the local community on day to day projects to improve the gardens infrastructure, maintain daily operations, and to educate the local population on low cost, sustainable, urban agriculture. Therefore, outside of our set objectives for our host organization we were also able to accomplish our personal objectives. We were able to see and learn about Bolivia and its culture, we met many amazing people and made great interpersonal connections, and we were able to learn a lot about ourselves and our future career paths.

As a group we were able to accomplish our objectives due to a very helpful and supportive staff at Fundación Alternativas. Furthermore, when meeting with our host organization and establishing our objectives we worked to establish realistic and achievable goals which were beneficial to our host organization and the local community. We wanted to be realistic when creating our goals so that we could put our time to use in the most productive and beneficial way possible. Additionally, the three of us worked to create a strong daily routine and schedule which allowed us to maximize our time and potential.

Questions Raised

Despite the initial learning curve of being in a new country, troubles finding housing, and several health-related setbacks we were able to quickly gain our footing and a sense of comfort. Our organization was very helpful, flexible, and communicative with us, which allowed us to optimize our time in country and accomplish our set objectives. Ideally, more time in country would have allowed us to have made a much greater impact. As is the case with most development issues, establishing food security is a daunting task which has no easy solutions. When working to solve major development issues two very important factors are time and man-hours dedicated to fixing the problem. In general, despite for some logistical and health

problems which we discuss later, our fellowship and work with Fundación Alternativas unfolded almost perfectly with few to no problems.

While working to improve food security in Bolivia we really gained a sense of how immense and complicated establishing food security is. There is no cookie cutter solution, and at times when researching ways to establish food security and mitigate the negative impacts, many questions did arise. Such as: How long will it take to establish food security in Bolivia? Is it feasible? Are the organization's proposed solutions the most effective way of solving this problem? Which other solutions may work better? Do the locals truly want our proposed solutions or are they okay with the current status quo?

Training and Mentoring

At our organization, the training was simple but effective. When arriving at the office, we spent the first week or two being debriefed on exactly what Fundación Alternativas was, their mission, what they had been able to accomplish, and how they would like to move forward into the future. This resulted in us reading lots of older research and policy briefs conducted by Fundación Alternativas. After completing all the readings, we had several meetings with the founder of Fundación Alternativas, Maria-Teresa Nogales, along with other co-workers and we discussed the readings to ensure we had a clear understanding of what Fundación Alternativas was about. This was followed by discussions regarding what they expected from us there and what we would be doing for the next two months. In regards to the urban garden, our training was even more basic. The first few days there we were shown around and were told how everything functioned. After that we were on our own and upon arrival each day we would be given specific tasks to be accomplished.

Overall I thought our training was sufficient and in areas, such as construction on the farm where our knowledge was limited, we would learn as we went along. The only area that lacked some resources to succeed was construction supplies on the farm itself. We had to make do with the limited tools available to us and as a result construction projects took much longer. An important aspect to consider was that the readings in the office and our work on the farm was conducted primarily in Spanish. As a result, a strong basic understanding and comprehension of Spanish was essential for this position at Fundación Alternativas. This is an area that some members of our group would have liked to have focused more on before arriving in La Paz. That being said, with the Spanish knowledge we already acquired, it was quite easy to pick up the Spanish that we were lacking previously.

Our faculty mentor Jon Unruh played an important supervisory and support role throughout our trip. He took a hands off approach, which gave us freedom to experiment and work through new challenges and obstacles, but was always available and ready to help when in need. We kept in touch approximately every two weeks through emails which allowed us to ask questions when encountering new challenges. Altogether we were pleased with our training in country and the support from our supervisor which allowed us to complete our objective.

What did you learn?

It can be hard to grasp and sum up the totality of what we learned after having had the opportunity and experience we had through our fellowship in Bolivia. Without a doubt the experience, as a whole, taught us a great deal. From learning how to be independent in a completely foreign country with a very different culture, to learning how to interact and work with new people in new places, to understanding how international non-governmental organizations work, we learned a great deal of not only professional lessons but also personal life lessons.

Intrinsically, by being placed in a new country with two of your peers, despite how much you prepare, there will be a slight cultural shock and adjustment period. We had to adjust to living at an altitude of nearly 4,000 meters, stomach illnesses due to sanitation issues, adjusting to a completely foreign culture and people, while also learning how to live almost 24 hours a day with two of your peers. Simultaneously, we had to begin working with a professional organization with high expectations. This is exactly the type of challenge that we love, because we not only learned so much about a new country and culture, along with the problems they face, but being kept on our toes with new challenges everyday allowed us to learn about ourselves. As international development students with strong interests in future work abroad dealing with development issues, this was a very good experience which gave us a taste of what our future careers may hold. This fellowship allowed us to see whether or not this type of work is really something we want to do as we move forward.

One of the most important lessons we learned through our time in Bolivia is the importance of being able to problem solve. Meaning being able to be cool, calm, and collected, open minded, and willing to deal with adversity or challenges which will certainly arise. The ability to problem solve and face challenges comes hand in hand with international development and life in general. This opportunity allowed us to develop this personal and professional skill which was very valuable.

From conducting our research on the urban food security problem in Bolivia, we each learned a lot about each other's research focuses. Furthermore, living and working with community members allowed us to learn a lot about the day to day life and culture in Bolivia. The hands-on component of our project, working in the urban garden, taught us all a lot about urban agriculture, its benefits, and the challenges faced by communities working to establish urban gardens. Finally, working closely with an NGO taught us a great deal about the inner workings of NGOs and the challenges they face.

What we would do differently

For future fellows interested in working with Fundación Alternativas or in Bolivia there are a few things we would do differently. One of our major initial challenges was finding a place to live. Our original plan for accommodations did not work out due to a miscommunication. This meant for the first almost two weeks we had to move from hostel to hostel until we were fortunate enough to find a new location to live. Not having a consistent place to live during the first two weeks – the hardest two weeks because we were adapting – definitely made the learning curve

a bit longer and harder. So we would strongly suggest having a guaranteed location to live before arriving and a back-up plan in case things do not go as planned.

Secondly, be very careful about what you eat and drink. Do your research before arriving in country about what is sanitary, what is safe to eat, and what medication you will need if you do get sick. Despite how prepared we thought we were, two of us were sick for extended periods of the trip. This made it harder to be as engaged in our work, made it harder to acclimate to our new surroundings, and generally made it harder to enjoy our time in country.

Community Implications and Further Work

The urban farm benefits the community members in the short term by providing them with fresh, organic vegetables throughout the year. This allows them to save between 5 and 30 Bolivianos per week on food expenses. While this seems like a small amount, these families are living day to day on low incomes, so it does have a significant impact. In the long term, the garden forges a sense of community among the neighbors as they participate in events at the garden and gain trust in one another. The farm has also contributed to a decrease in the levels of violence in the neighborhood, which were previously high. On an individual and family level, the garden results in healthier eating and cooking habits, improving food security, as the members use their fresh vegetables and share recipes with one another. Furthermore, by participating in the community events held at the garden, members and their families are educated on nutritional health and well-being. Finally, the organization empowers people to grow their own food in a resourceful way by demonstrating alternative methods of urban farming using recycled and low cost materials that can be easily found around the city such as used plastic soda bottles.

By working in the urban farm, our fellowship will positively impact the food security of the members of the farm and the greater La Paz area. Fundación Alternativas employs gardening methods that are low cost and easily replicable. The organization runs projects that bring the farming methods to underutilized urban space as well as other neighborhoods and primary schools. These initiatives, in addition to policy advocacy, work to spread the ideas and techniques of urban agriculture to the rest of the city in order to promote the improvement of food security in La Paz as a whole on the policy level as well as in practice.

Food security needs to be a legal responsibility of the municipal government. This is one major task undertaken by Fundación Alternativas. So far, they have had success in drafting a law and getting it passed by the Municipal Government of La Paz. Furthermore, the organization runs the Municipal Committee on Food Security of La Paz. The committee has conducted studies including a recent one on the supply dynamics of large markets in neighboring El Alto. Despite this progress, there is still much to be done to ensure food security in La Paz. Future steps for

the organization include creating a proposal for alternative farmer's markets that bring the farmer to the consumer in order to give the farmer a fair price, as well as a land use plan that allows for underutilized urban space to be used for urban agriculture.



Program Evaluation

The McBurney Fellowship allowed us to gain valuable professional and hands on experience working with a non-governmental organization in a developing country. It was an ideal setting for us to apply the concepts and knowledge we have gained from studying international development to a real issue on the ground. We were exposed to the challenges associated with non-governmental work that relies heavily on outside funding and volunteers. Additionally, working in Spanish hugely improved our proficiency in the language.

We appreciated that the McBurney Fellowship guided us in terms of choosing an NGO and offered us the assistance that we needed along the way, while at the same time allowing us to organize our work, living, and travel arrangements independently with the NGO.

We would advise to future fellows going to La Paz to try to arrange their living situation prior to arriving. When we got there we realized it was difficult to look for a short term rental apartment. If we had done it a few months in advance, we could have arranged something with Airbnb landlords, for example. As well, we would suggest to come up with a specific project for the time spent in the garden, something that suits the needs of the organization as well as the abilities and interests of the fellow. We initially proposed a project to install beekeeping in the garden but the funding was not available. Without an end goal to work towards, the days at the garden can seem repetitive and sometimes aimless.

Finally, we suggest when traveling abroad and working with host organizations it is very important to communicate and to have clear objectives and expectations with your host organization. It is also important to be very open minded. Different cultures and places work much differently then we may be used to. For these reasons future fellows should be very open minded and patient. Expect there to be a learning curve. Additionally, future fellows should have a good understanding of the Spanish language.

We highly recommend Fundación Alternativas for future fellows. The organization has been funded for the next five years so it will be continuing to expand its urban agriculture initiatives as well as lobby for improved food security policy. In preparation for working with the organization, we would recommend that the fellow familiarize him/herself with the overarching concepts of food systems, food security, and food sovereignty as well as the social and political context of Bolivia. With that being said, the director of Fundación Alternativas makes a point to meet with each intern at the outset to understand the interns' backgrounds and strengths in order to find assignments that will be well suited and benefit both the organization and the intern.