

# Supporting Urban Agriculture for Food Security in La Paz, Bolivia



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## Project Overview

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 Location: La Paz, Bolivia  
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### 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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# Supporting Urban Agriculture for Food Security in La Paz, Bolivia

## Fellowship's Rationale and Objectives

The profile of agriculture in Bolivia is changing dramatically, shifting from smallholder farming to multinational monocropping. While this process has taken place over decades, along with the increase in food imports and rural-urban migration, issues like climate change have increasingly brought the food crisis to a head. In light of this, several Bolivian NGOs are working to increase the accessibility and resiliency of the food system. I worked with La Paz-based Fundacion Alternativas on their efforts to introduce and grow urban agriculture in Bolivia. While there are many changes that must be implemented rurally, much of the future to food security, and food sovereignty, lies in urban agriculture.

## Background/Context

Food insecurity has consequences that go far beyond hunger: it decreases a population's health, lowers economic opportunities, and entrenches inequalities. As the poorest country in South America, Bolivia suffers from a high level of food insecurity; this is a growing concern. Yet the complex of factors that have decreased the sustainability of the food system make food security perniciously difficult to achieve.

First, Bolivia's agricultural system underwent extensive reform during the 1990s, when international institutions helped push the country toward a neoliberal economic model. This reform expanded the east's export-oriented agriculture and boosted GDP, but decreased Bolivians' access to domestic crops. In the west, the harsher climate of the altiplano discourages outside investment. When the climate is favourable, this system works for growers – while staple crops don't bring in huge profits, nor do they incur great losses – but with increasing climate change, it is becoming more fragile. With limited ability to take risks, many farmers choose to cultivate safe, staple crops instead of those adaptable to a changing climate. Additionally, with so many smallholder farmers growing the same crops, farmers' need for stability precludes more nutritional and diverse options. Thus, in general, there is a polarization of the Bolivian agricultural sector into two options, neither particularly sustainable.

For much of Bolivia's population, the problem is not just the changing agricultural systems, but also changes in patterns of consumption. Over the past few decades, Bolivia has undergone extensive rural-urban migration. As a result, ties to the countryside have weakened, and in cities, vegetables are more expensive and harder to find than chicken and bread. For many of the urban poor, moving has cut off access to local support systems and led to increased hunger. At the same time, many of those who move to cities increase their purchasing power. This

demographic is now able to afford imported and processed foods, to which there is an element of both status and ease. This trend contributes to growing obesity in urban areas.

Thus, some urban residents suffer from malnutrition, and others from obesity. You can find members of both of these groups in urban centres like La Paz, where my fellowship took place. Cotahuma, the community served by the urban garden, is an area that is underserved by both markets and supermarkets. Communities like this are the main focus of Alternativas' grassroots efforts, but the NGO also works to effect policy change to the benefit of all communities in the city.

## Activities

I worked with Fundacion Alternativas five days a week: two days a week in their head office, and three days a week in their urban garden. The garden, far up on the hillside in La Paz, has around 10 small parcels of land where the staff grow food, as well as 40 parcels owned by the “vecinos,” who are members of the community. I spent my days first watering the display parcels, and then performing other maintenance tasks – like making compost and harvesting – or working on projects.

While I was there, I also assisted two agronomy students who were conducting projects for their theses. Juan Pablo, who worked in the garden, started a pilot project to run water lines with small sprinklers through a newly assigned plot of land. This project has the potential to hugely increase the efficiency of the watering system. Currently, volunteers fill up barrels of water by the vecinos' parcels; the vecinos either borrow watering cans to fill with water from these barrels, or bring hoses to connect to one of our spigots. Although such projects are implemented gradually, improvements like this ultimately make it easier for the busy vecinos to work on their parcels. Watering the parcels takes up a lot of volunteer time, and efficiency in this area enables the NGO to better allocate labour and increases their ability to work on additional projects.

In addition to helping with this project and others – including making special insect traps and renovating and reorganizing the storage facilities – I began making and updating the garden's educational materials. The harsh sun in the winter and heavy rain in the summer mean that paint fades quickly from signs, so there was a lot of work to do. Much of the existing signage had faded almost entirely, and so I tried to recreate some signs and create new ones. When I had time after my other tasks, I would begin by sanding down wood, and then add base varnish, multiple base coats, and the lettering and designs. They were meant to be engaging and educational: for example, one sign described the different plants that could be grown for different seasons.

During the days spent at the office, I assisted the office staff with their work in education and policy. The office staff have created municipal food security councils in three large Bolivian cities, begun school garden and education projects, and have pushed forward policy on food

security and urban agriculture. I wrote two policy briefs to convince politicians of the importance of urban agriculture. One brief was on urban agriculture as a tactic to address food insecurity, the other as a tactic to address climate change. My time there was spent researching and writing, and I thus served as a strong contributor to their policy efforts. The NGO staff told me that most elected officials are not well-versed in these types of initiatives, and that many agricultural and health policies that sound good on paper have not lived up to their public image. As a result, I regard my work in the office as the most tangible contribution to Alternativas' efforts.

### Challenges and Successes

While I knew from speaking to professors that my initial proposal would differ substantially from my activities with the NGO, it is one thing knowing that and quite another experiencing it firsthand. I came into my internship with an idea of what I could provide to the NGO – namely, I wanted to do research into how Montreal and international urban agriculture practices, see how they differed from Alternativas' work, and create a report identifying avenues for potential projects. Once at Alternativas, it became very clear that this type of organizational process was not what the NGO needed or how they operated. There was a subset of the team working in the garden, but these people were aware of what could be done – they just lacked the capacity to do it. Instead, they worked with agronomics thesis candidates to test out systems, or accepted teams of volunteers to do larger projects, such as building greenhouses or greywater catchment systems. In the meantime, they worked hard to maintain and slowly grow and improve the garden, even meeting with interested groups to advise them how to start their own urban garden.

I was told by one of the two garden managers that due to the uncertainty of their garden, which was on public land, policy-based work in the office was much more helpful than any garden-oriented research or report. Creating legal channels for appropriating underused land for urban agriculture was more important than garden work, though both were necessary. As a result, my focus shifted to projects with strong educational impact: creating more signage for the garden and writing policy briefs.

### Questions Raised

More than anywhere else I have worked, I found that things worked best when I took the initiative to take on tasks myself and push for results. This allowed me a good amount of creative control over the policy briefs I wrote. Rather than simply being asked to do the work, I could toss around ideas with Alternativas staff, and my research and ideas informed a lot of the choices we made. It made sense that this was the best functioning part of the fellowship, as it was the point of overlap between what they needed and what I could bring to the table. Compared to my work in the garden, where I had to modify my aspirations, in the office I was able to go full steam ahead.

Once I started working in La Paz, I realized that my research had not prepared me for ebb and flow of life. I spent a lot of time orienting myself and learning how all manner of social systems differed in this new environment. Applying for the fellowship, I thought a lot about how I could prepare for the type of work I would be doing in Bolivia; once I got there, I realized that much of what I had done was superfluous. Although my knowledge of Bolivia really helped me, there is really nothing that can prepare you, apart from experiencing another style of work and life. As a result, much of my time was spent learning these new systems. The experience made me think seriously about how foreign volunteers can best effect change when so much of their time is spent adapting.

### Training and Mentoring

The staff at Alternativas are friendly and helpful, and I had the pleasure of getting to know them professionally and personally. I found that, if I took initiative, I had the chance to learn a great deal. In the office, I was able to discuss my policy briefs with the staff. However, I felt I learned the most working in the garden. In the garden, both the thesis candidates and the garden managers were immensely helpful and encouraging. Despite difficulties with some projects, they always maintained a positive attitude, and were forthcoming in sharing the details of their work.

My first week in the garden, I was trained in the basic operation, and learned from the staff specific challenges and successes in operations. This allowed me to adjust to the routine of work there while highlighting specific project areas. While a large event forestalled office training, I had initial conversations with staff that got me started on the research behind the policy briefs. When things had quieted down, I was able to meet with staff more frequently to discuss the structure of the briefs themselves.

### What did you learn?

A whole host of different opportunities and challenges made this fellowship an informative and fulfilling experience. In this different context, I learned about my own strengths and limitations. I struggled with tasks I expected to accomplish in a straightforward manner, and succeeded in areas that I never anticipated.

I learned a lot about my field of study. As an International Development student, despite good intentions and a critical approach, I developed certain ideas about how things would work in Bolivia. But there is a huge difference between reading about somewhere and being there. Papers I had written at McGill about certain facets of Bolivian politics weren't wrong, exactly, so much as distanced from people's lives and concerns.

On that note, next time, I would try to get a better idea of a potential project situation beforehand. Before leaving, I did a lot of background reading about the country, as well as speaking to individuals from urban agriculture groups here in Montreal. While both of these were helpful, they still did not fully prepare me for life and work there.

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Yet a large part of what made the fellowship so amazing was being able to speak with Bolivian volunteers about politics and life in general. I had spent the first half of the summer as an Arts Research Internship Award (ARIA) student with an International Development postdoc, and was planning on writing a thesis in political anthropology. After working and speaking with such interesting people, I became fascinated with Bolivian politics, and the currents of everyday life. Now I am writing my thesis on Bolivian politics, something I never anticipated, because of all that I learned while abroad. I am better able to see through the fog of academic discourse, and my work is more relevant as a result.

I was able to learn a lot, but I wish that I had spent more time in La Paz. Next time, I would commit myself to a longer timeframe so that I could use my knowledge to help the NGO with longer-term projects. Additionally, I would search not only for theoretical, but anecdotal knowledge, to get a sense of what day-to-day life is like.

### Community Implications and Further Work

The garden has two paid staff, but its maintenance depends on volunteers. My work contributed to the functioning and improvement of the only public community garden in La Paz, and to my knowledge, Bolivia. My projects in the garden had short-term impact. My project assistance in the garden helped improve the functioning of the space. This made a positive difference on the lives of the vecinos who come to the garden, many of whom are lower income and live in food deserts, underserved by affordable markets. My work also increased access to educational materials for community groups who visit the garden to



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learn the importance of urban agriculture and food security. My office work had longer-term impact: the policy briefs I wrote will be used to convince politicians, policy-makers, and investors to invest in communities. They were part of a larger effort by Alternativas' municipal-politics team; one of their major achievements to date is the passing of legislation in La Paz to allow unused land to be appropriated for urban agriculture.

### **How might your fellowship make a difference for the people you worked with?**

My work in the office formed part of a series of briefs to convince policy-makers of the importance of urban agriculture. While this concept is common in Montreal, it is only beginning to be introduced in Bolivian cities. Part of this is due to altitude and climate; another part stems from the temporary nature of efforts by international bodies like the FAO. However, in light of increasing urbanization, urban agriculture has huge potential to connect citizens to their food systems. Community members benefitted from Alternativas' urban garden, which not only empowers the families who use it, but also acts as an example or ideal for other community groups looking to create something similar. Additionally, Alternativas' policy work paves the way for urban agriculture, both in La Paz and throughout Bolivia. Their work hits at both the community and policy levels, but the effects are felt most keenly by the vecinos, who now have greater knowledge of growing and increased access to fresh, healthy foods.

### **Program Evaluation**

This fellowship was an amazing opportunity for me. It gave me the chance to work at a Latin American climate-based NGO – something I have been interested in ever since starting at McGill. The experience I had with the McBurney fellowship was unlike anything I had done before. It put my field of study in perspective, and even though I knew I would learn a lot, I learned far more than I had anticipated. I had expectations about life, politics, and culture that, though informed by research, were largely upended by my experience there.

Now I understand how little I know as a student, and how much I need to learn. After learning from the articulate staff and volunteers at Alternativas, I gained a new perspective on the issues I read about in an academic context. Now, instead of merely burying myself in theory, I am writing my political-anthropology thesis on Bolivian politics. Being there cut through the fog of the papers I read on the one hand, and made my thesis research stronger and more specific on the other.

For the past decade, I have wanted to move to South America. Now, after encountering the power of grassroots initiatives, I am eager to return. The question that endures for me is how I can support such initiatives internationally; how I can elevate the voices of the leaders of these initiatives and change outside narratives or perceptions. Lately I've been reckoning with what that means; what my role is to play telling stories or fighting for causes that aren't my own. This fellowship was my first time in that position, and showed me the types of ways in which NGOs and social movements can benefit from someone outside coming in. It has helped me connect the food security struggles in La Paz to those in Montreal and think practically about conveying these connections to others. It has thus been my largest step to date in the pursuit of my goals.

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**What did you value most about the fellowship?**

The fellowship was the perfect opportunity to learn. While my most significant product came from my time writing policy briefs, my favourite part of the experience was my time in the garden. I was surrounded by the Bolivian staff and volunteers, all interesting, all very different. I not only learned more about urban agriculture, but I also learned about Bolivian history and politics, and I learned about their lives. One of the agronomy students, the son of sociology professors, would recount episodes of Bolivian history to add context to contemporary debates in conversations that helped inform parts of my thesis. Another student added a local perspective to a project I had worked on as part of my ARIA – a paper detailing Chinese infrastructure investment in Latin America – by describing the way many Bolivians felt about the situation. I worked with wonderful people in a fascinating city, and am so grateful for the experience.

**Any advice for future fellows?**

My biggest advice would be to apply as part of a team. It really helped living with other McGill students, even though they were working with a different NGO. When I got to La Paz, my friend Armando had been there for a month already. I learned a lot of things on my own after he left, but having the comfort of another person is important. I lived with two McBurney fellows, and I saw that it also really helped them to be relying on one another, project-wise.

**How useful was it to interact with other fellows?**

As far as I know, the McBurney program has not connected current fellows. However, I lived in La Paz with two other McBurney fellows I knew before, which was incredibly helpful. I also was able to speak in depth to the Mexican McBurney teams about their programs, but again, I met them prior to the McBurney. However, the McBurney program connected me to past fellows of Alternativas, who provided helpful advice.

**Any suggestions for how to improve the program?**

Definitely connect the students more with one another and start a resource bank of things that all past fellows have learned. This could be comments like mine about the need to be ready to be very assertive and determined, or it could be information that NGOs sometimes fail to provide. For instance, my NGO was unaware that people entering on a tourist visa had to visit the migration office to get their passport stamped before their first thirty days in the country were up, despite having ninety days in which to stay in Bolivia.

Similarly, I think promoting continuity with NGOs like Alternativas is a good step. However, it would be ideal if there were a professor at McGill who could help prospective fellows plan with a strong understanding of organizational capacity and design, and could be consulted during the project implementation. Strongly encouraging students to apply in teams could also help in this regard.

**Was your project part of a larger/ongoing program? If so, what are the next steps?**

My project was part of a partnership that began last year with three fellows. They too spent time in the garden and the office, each crafting a policy brief and working together to create structures like a small greenhouse and a shaded lunch area. My fellowship continued in that vein, writing policy briefs and updating the garden's educational materials. There is definitely room to continue with this project. If students go in a team, there is always lots of building and engineering work to be done in the garden. In the office, students can continue to write policy briefs, sit in on meetings, and help in the development of elementary-school programming.

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I would continue this partnership but make more of an effort to send a team of people every year; I think that last year, this is what enabled Sophie, Max, and Marc to make change in the garden. Because I was alone, I had comparatively more office work. Even without large garden projects, though, this policy-based work is ongoing, and an excellent opportunity to help Alternativas make a difference while also learning about political change and urban agriculture.

Students should consult in depth with Alternativas staff and past interns to craft projects that build off past work. My work in the garden can always be expanded upon. Signs fade quickly, and with preparation ahead of time, could be supplemented with laminated infographics for school groups visiting the garden. The projects I assisted with could also be a fruitful area for future volunteers. For instance, there is exciting work being done to modernize the garden's water collection and distribution systems, and these still require significant effort. Additionally, during the dry season, bush fires are a big concern. Helping the organization establish procedures in case of such a fire is necessary work. I would like to see future fellows planning something in the garden that incorporates a community-building event and pulls more people in to learn about self-sufficient agriculture, building, and more. That will take a longer timeframe and planning with Alternativas staff ahead of the actual fellowship.

Ultimately, I would recommend this placement to other students. It is a great mix of office and field work, with an ideal mix of English and Spanish (most office staff are bilingual, but garden staff are not, making the latter an immersive work environment). Finally, Alternativas is doing important work in Bolivia, and especially La Paz. With the aforementioned changes, this partnership could be long-lasting and beneficial for both sides.