



Global Compact
Cities Programme



Global Compact Cities Programme

Food security - a core component of a leading
city's transformation agenda

By Julia Laidlaw



This case study originally appeared in *Cities for the future: Innovative and principles-based approaches to urban equity, sustainability and governance* (published in April 2015).

Cities for the future is the biannual flagship publication of the Global Compact Cities Programme and is financially supported by the Research and Innovation Portfolio at RMIT University.

For more information, visit www.citiesprogramme.org.

Cover image courtesy of Global Compact Cities Programme.



Working in one of the urban agriculture gardens high on the slopes of Medellín, Colombia. Eco Gardens or *Eco Huertas* projects are supported by EDU, the Urban Development Agency of Medellín. These gardens are one of a number of social projects connected to the city boundary project, known as *Cinturon Verde* (Green Belt) or *Jardín Circunvalar de Medellín*. Image: EDU Medellín.



Medellín, Colombia



Food security – a core component of a leading city's transformation agenda

Julia Laidlaw, Research Officer, Global Compact Cities Programme and Food Security Officer, TAFEA Provincial Branch of Vanuatu Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Vanuatu

The Colombian city of Medellín has overcome years of violent civil war with a social transformation agenda that has focused the city's planning and resources on inclusion and redressing inequity. We learn about one of Medellín's many innovative and participatory strategies – food security.

Medellín is the capital city of the central northwestern Colombian state of Antioquia. It is Colombia's second largest city, the country's commercial centre and has a population of 350,000 across the broader metropolitan area. Built along and up the sides of the Aburra Valley following the route of Rio, Medellín is a stretched city, checkered with peaks and ridgelines that, as the city has grown, have caused major issues in urban connectedness, restricting access to services and infrastructure.

The effects of this disconnection are especially felt in the poorer, often informal neighbourhoods otherwise known as *asentamientos*. Violence, drugs and crime are still commonly concentrated in the most impoverished neighbourhoods. These informal communities continue to grow along the steep slopes and ridges away from the city centre as rural refugees migrate to the city to escape ongoing violence in the outer regions.

These new communities tend to be matriarchal as most of the men have died or disappeared. High levels of stress, depression and trauma affect a great number of people and not having enough to eat is a daily challenge.

With a motto of '*Todos por la vida*' ('Everyone for life'), the city has worked steadily over the past 10 years towards alleviating the deeply felt effects of over 20 years of civil war and is aspiring to build a much safer and more dignified future for its population. This has been supported by long-term political cohesion with three consecutive mayors committing to a consistent approach to urban transformation. Their approach has been to prioritize participatory development and social inclusion so that services and infrastructure are directed to where they are needed most.

In April 2014, we witnessed firsthand the impact of the city's transformation with state-of-the-art and

pedagogically designed infrastructure such as locally and internationally funded libraries and schools, museums and childcare centres that have intentionally been placed in poorer areas. The positive impact of this strategy on the city's citizens was clearly visible. Greening and building biodiversity in the city is also a priority.

Food security in Medellín

Significant efforts are underway to lessen the severity and prevalence of household food insecurity and childhood malnutrition throughout the city. With nutritional deprivation proven to have lasting and irreversible effects, local government is working on a number of short-term and long-term food insecurity mitigation strategies.

Current projects operate at household, community and city-wide levels, experimenting with different organizational methods to incorporate food production into the urban landscape, building community kitchens and school food programs. The city government has also used its participatory budgeting model to identify locally responsive projects that provide dignified forms of emergency food assistance that also support the local market.

Urban agriculture has been clearly identified as a way to address this critical issue in the medium to long term and there are a growing number of community *huertas* (gardens) within and around the city. In addition to providing access to fresh food, urban agriculture is being recognized as a tool for therapy, education and economic development, with the city piloting a program that uses gardens along its borders as a way of regulating the growth of informal settlements and feeding the city in the future.

We viewed two projects focused on food security, with both employing innovative approaches to actively encourage informal trading between households, the formation of markets and the trade of household fresh food surplus with the local food bank.

The projects are facilitated by two different arms of city government: the Enterprise for Urban Development (*Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano*, or EDU) and the Secretary for Social Inclusion and Family for the Medellín Municipal Government (*Secretariat de Inclusion Social y Familia del Alcalde de Medellín*).

Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano–EDU

EDU, Medellín's Urban Development Agency, is the 'action arm' of the Medellín Municipal Government. It is responsible for delivering the infrastructure projects that are part of the city government's master plan. An unusual development agency, its motto is "we don't do projects, we do transformation".

In line with city objectives, EDU uses a genuine participatory development model for the identification of locally responsive programs for sustainable urban transformation. Their design approach is '*Urbanismo Civico-Pedagogico*' (Civic Pedagogical Urbanism) – a form of urban design that builds social equity by creating urban environments that are liveable, accessible and educational. Whilst the majority of EDU's work is major infrastructure, the mix also includes food security projects.

Many aspects of Medellín are fascinating and unique. EDU is primarily funded from the profits of city-owned utilities company EPM, which is responsible for the city's

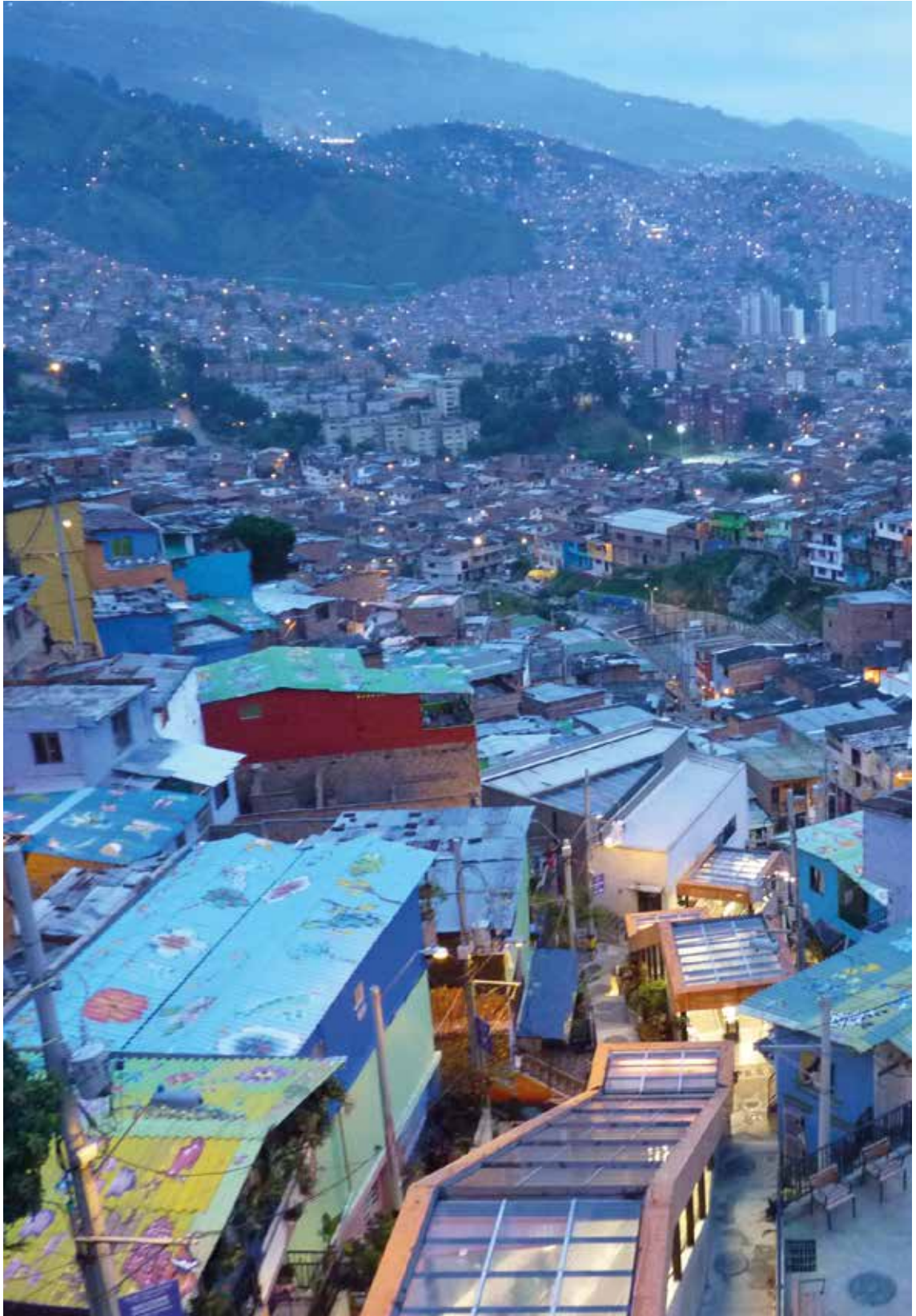
gas, water and electricity. Medellín is deeply fortunate to have plentiful water and its electricity is hydro-generated. EPM works as an independent entity and is widely recognized for its corporate efficiency. However, it also has a social agenda. Service rates are tiered according to the socioeconomic status of each urban area and its profits are consciously channelled into the city's infrastructure and social projects, which are directed to enriching the lives of citizens.

Much of EDU's work has been directed at formalizing and transforming informal settlements around the city to improve community safety, access and hygiene through education and community participation. The now famous cable car in Comuna 8 is an iconic example of Medellín's methodology whereby new infrastructure projects are used to open up communities, overcome violence and insecurity and redress physical, social and economic isolation.

These projects have not been easy or quick to implement, with initial engagement with community members ranging from very hostile to suspicious, and EDU having to work hard to gain safe access to certain areas. This hostility has been overcome using a slow process of extensive community engagement and participation, with the aim of building trust over time. Most often when a community has eventually agreed to engage with EDU, it would be on the precondition that no one would be forced to leave. EDU would agree based on the provision that no one else would be allowed to join the settlement. This critical first step allowed for the clear definition and self-regulation of communities on the fundamental agreement that 'no one leaves but no one enters'.



The beginnings of the *Cinturon Verde* (Green Belt) path. This 72 km project of pathways and landscaping trains employs local community members (mandated 30 per cent women) to build it. Its aim is to create a physical and psychological boundary to the city's sprawling growth and to connect and open remote communities. Offering magnificent views of the city, it should become a popular site for visitors. There are educational sites and *eco-huertas* (urban gardens) along the path. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.



Medellín stretches along and up the slopes of a large valley, with informal housing becoming more precarious the higher it is built. Pictured centre are the escalators of Comuna 13, which open what was a previously dangerous region and allows safe and easy travel for residents. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

EDU's success to date has come from investing large amounts of time in trust building and community engagement. A testament to their approach, all EDU representatives were greeted warmly as we toured the city and we were invited into people's homes.

A particularly fascinating feature of EDU is the involvement of its largely technically-qualified staff, including architects and engineers, in community engagement. All these staff are completely involved in the community engagement process. It will often take a couple of years to engage the community and implement an infrastructure project. Labour for projects is sourced from within each community, increasing the sustainability of projects, building community ownership of new projects and building skills and capacity.

We witnessed a number of examples of EDU's transformative urban development through citizen participation, including the *La Bobo*; *Cinturon Verde*; and *Eco-Huertas Pilotas* (pilot eco-gardens) projects.

La Bobo

In Medellín, informal settlements are built along the margins of existing communities. La Bobo was one such settlement, with informal housing built precariously along the edges of a water channel on a steep slope. The five-year project to transform this region apparently started with a very hostile and fearful reception from the community. EDU was eventually allowed into the region on the promise that no one would be evicted. The subsequent agreement that no one else would be

allowed to join/enter the community, facilitated the community's self regulation and enabled boundaries to be established. However, those hostile beginnings were difficult to imagine as we were proudly invited into the new homes to be shown photos of the original dwellings.

Cinturon Verde

The new *Cinturon Verde* (Green Belt) project will build 72km of pathways and parklands along the mountainous edges of Medellín, regions that were previously very isolated and dangerous. One of its primary aims is to create a physical limit to the *asamientos*, a boundary where no other construction should take place. The landscaping and path construction of *Cinturon Verde* is undertaken by local community members. Thirty per cent of the workforce are women and workers receive certified training.

Cinturon Verde connects to and is being developed in co-ordination with the establishment of Integrated Community Centres (*Unidades de Vida Articuladas*) in more marginalized areas around the city. These community centres provide modern and safe spaces for community sports, arts and education, and reflect the city's prioritization of pedagogic and socially inclusive planning.

Alongside the *Cinturon Verde* pathway, community classrooms have been built for the purpose of ongoing environmental education and capacity building. We saw groups of women relaxing with young children in these isolated areas — a telling reflection of improved security.



This mother and daughter are pictured in front of their urban garden (*huerta familiar*) in one of the highest and most remote parts of Medellín. The garden's development has been supported by EDU and NGO Fundación Salva Terra. The majority of the women in these projects are sole parents whose husbands and sons have died in the narcotics fuelled civil war. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

Eco-Huertas Pilotas

In collaboration with Fundación Salva Terra, EDU recently commenced a pilot gardens project. Using purely agro-ecology methods and training, the pilot gardens are located on the city's fringes high up in the hillsides where citizens are isolated and there is room for urban agriculture and food production.

A number of community garden spaces are being trialled along *Cinturon Verde*. We visited three sites. In *Huerta Comunitaria* (Barrio El Faro), families share access to a parcel of land and coordinate its maintenance. Production is chemical free and families receive training in agroecological cultivation. In *Huerta Familiares*, individual families gain access to small parcels of land and training to get them started with household cultivation.

The predominance of women in these projects – single mothers whose husbands had died in the narcotics-fuelled civil war – was a sharp reminder of Medellín's violent history.

Huerta Escolar is a school kitchen garden pilot in a very impoverished, matriarchal community. The school is not currently recognized formally so it is not eligible for the food assistance program afforded to other government schools. The school has set up and runs a food program for 300 students. Mothers in this region use donated scraps to cook three meals a day, such as bone soup. Children in the region suffer from malnutrition exacerbated by permanent parasites. This fresh food and garden education program promises to have a significant impact on their lives.

SISF's food security projects

We also learnt about a number of food programs run by Medellín's Department for Social Inclusion and Family (*Secretariat de Inclusión Social y Familia del Alcalde de Medellín*, or SISF). SISF manages and develops emergency food programs in Medellín. It coordinates school food programs through which all students in the city receive fortified milk and lunch every day. Students who qualify are also eligible for a breakfast program.

In the inner city suburb known as Comuna 10, a high number of residents are forced to supplement their diets with food parcels. The community has chosen to use their funding allocation – allocated via the municipal participatory budgeting scheme – to test a new food parcel program. The new program has moved residents away from traditional 'hand-outs' of pre-packed, non perishable foods to a coupon system where each registered household gets a monthly pack of coupons to spend at the local market. This is seen as a more dignified and healthy way of providing emergency food support as people can choose according to their personal food preferences, interact with the market and access perishable foods that were previously unavailable.

We also saw state-of-the-art, pedagogically-designed centres that provide free childcare and education for thousands of children from low income households between the ages of three months and five years. Fourteen centres have already been built and four more are planned. In these centres, children receive a nutritionally balanced diet that meets 80 per cent of their daily needs.

Medellín has been a participant of the United Nations Global Compact since 2013 and is actively working to promote its innovative, socially-focused urban practice with other cities.



A *Unida de Vida Articuladas* (UVA or Integrated Community Centre). UVAs are urban transformations developed through public consultation to promote sport, recreation, culture and community participation – redefining urban landmarks in 'forgotten' neighbourhoods opening public space, meeting places and enhancing social inclusion. Image: Agencia de Cooperación e Inversión de Medellín y el Área Metropolitana - ACI.