

Porto, Portugal

Gardening for good

Twenty-three organic community kitchen gardens scattered across the Porto conurbation are the basis of new territorial policies which involve individual residents, communities, local organisations and institutions. This is a collective movement centred on practical solutions – personal validation, economic subsistence, rebuilding social bonds – to develop community spirit and promote environmental values as part of the trend towards sustainable development.

Gardening for good

Horta à Porta¹ is a programme that enhances the economic, environmental and social dynamics of the Porto region through the creation of community organic gardens and the promotion of active involvement which empowers local people and institutions.

It is an innovative programme shaped by the values and culture of tradition, the land and the local community, which challenges participants to adopt a vision of society and solidarity together with broader environmental activism in connection with public policy.

Its unique ethos is to mobilise and engage local people to return to their roots and the earth, representing a break with modern consumerism and the subsequent breakdown of social and community bonding caused by fragmentation.

One could say that Horta à Porta is a happy mix of people motivated by getting in touch with and valuing the land, local communities that embrace the new social and environmental management policies in the territories and specialised structures that incorporate educational activities and facilitate self-organisation.

In the Metropolitan Region of Porto, there are 23 of these community gardens totalling four hectares, and the forecast is for a large-scale increase in the near future. The management and support model has been disseminated over several regions and local government is investing more and more in this field. The shared goal is to respond to immediate demands in existing territories, as well as entertaining solutions which could be sustained regardless of economic needs.

The project was led by LIPOR, the Greater Porto Metropolitan Waste Management Service. The budget of €239 568 is financed from the specialised *Miniwaste* line of the LIFE+ programme² (€55 732) and from the Cohesion Fund (€63 422) for the distribution of compost barrels), matched with €120 414 from LIPOR's own resources.

¹ <http://www.hortadaformiga.com/conteudos.cfm?ss=7>

² <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/about/index.htm>

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Today there is a movement that brings together several thousand people and dozens of local authorities across Portugal around so-called *community vegetable gardens*, a description that incorporates different contexts and more specific names including community, biological, educational or just urban gardens.

Horta à Porta is a project in the Metropolitan Region of Porto, home to 2 million people, in which residents and institutions have joined in an initiative set up by LIPOR, the intermunicipal waste treatment organisation set up by eight of the 11 municipalities (Espinho, Gondomar, Maia, Matosinhos, Oporto, Povia de Varzim, Vila do Conde and Valongo). With the exception of Espinho, it is the suburbs north of Porto which are involved in Horta à Porta, the community gardens being located in Porto, Matosinhos, Maia, Povia de Varzim and Vila do Conde. The budget of €239 568 is financed from the specialised *Miniwaste* line of the LIFE+ programme³ (€55 732) and from the Cohesion Fund (€63 422) for the distribution of compost barrels), matched with €120 414 from LIPOR's own resources.

The involvement of local communities and associations that form the Horta à Porta partnership begins with submitting a statement of interest to LIPOR, which makes an initial assessment of the proposal. The circumstances are checked over and the

means and conditions for bilateral cooperation are negotiated and set down in a convention, which becomes the written partnership agreement. The way the project is managed and the joint work is organised has been co-constructed gradually with a very open mind, resulting in a sense of participation in decision-making, increased trust and a sense of community. Similarly, the users of kitchen



gardens are invited to submit their feedback, ideas and proposals for changes to be made. At the monthly meeting, everyone speaks and the input from LIPOR's technical assistant takes the form of a conversation and exchange of ideas, rather than that of an inspection with a punitive feel. Users' general meetings have not yet been established in all gardens, although it is a goal to be realised in due course.

The Northern Region of Portugal, with Porto as its economic and social heart, is now making a large investment in competitiveness to withstand industrial restructuring and to adapt to the knowledge economy. This strategy⁴ involves all institutional actors in the region and will also be conducted taking into account existing social hardship. In recent years there has been a decline in social development and a rise in poverty. It is this framework of challenge and need which has nurtured Horta à Porta, which has a local and accessible dimension which simultaneously influences regional development, especially in environmental matters.

The programme strategy combines the goals of improving residents' quality of life, environmental education for youth and adults, and activities to valorise and even reduce solid waste.

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/about/index.htm>

⁴ ON.2 O Novo Norte Programa Operacional Regional do Norte (North Region Operational Programme)



Fig. 2. User group with Claúdia Mouro (LIPOR) and Fernanda Ribeiro (City of Matosinhos) (photo CR 2011)

The programme is therefore developing around the creation of organic kitchen gardens across the territory. It is a shared dynamic, in partnership with local communities and other economic and social organisations. Each garden is a project in itself, with specific objectives and spatial contexts such that development strategies vary, and this flexibility results in a fairly broad typology of concepts and singularities.

Preparing the land for organic horticulture involves dividing it into plots of 25 square metres, and installing a water supply, garden sheds and composters (compost barrels). This is done in partnership and by distributing tasks and responsibilities, which incidentally are not always the same. As a result of its activities since 2004, the Horta à Porta network now has 23 kitchen gardens on a total of four hectares of land where 'home made' organic farming is practiced. What's more, around 1 600 people in the Porto region are on the waiting list to access a garden in the network. A clear indicator of success is that there are very few dropouts.

Kitchen gardens for personal development

A shared goal of all the kitchen gardeners in the Horta à Porta programme is to provide a new spatial, relational and even economic framework for anyone involved. The personal dimension has priority, coexisting alongside other aspects which are important but not of the same magnitude.

Fernando Leite, President of LIPOR, believes that the modern lifestyle must be rethought, because it is unsustainable and does not guarantee the happiness of men and women on the planet. The kitchen garden programme is just one contribution towards this goal of social change. In addition, the views of this ideologist are reinforced by questions of identity that deeply bind individuals to their cultural roots. Thus Fernando Leite believes that the Portuguese have a duty to rethink their individual identity and behaviours in daily life, especially consumer habits, to adopt more natural practices which are closer to the those of their families and the territories to which they belong – for instance to start eating fruits that were popular in earlier times.



Fig. 3. Creustins kitchen garden for the unemployed

One wonders how this return to the land, with its arduous physical effort and partial loss of freedom, can influence personal development, encouraging a more positive mood and sense of well-being. Users of the Meilão Social Garden, central to the therapeutic community for people recovering from addiction, work with their anxiety and their notion of useful time in direct relation to the land, says Antonio, an instructor of this centre, run by the Norte Vida association. The active contact with nature leads to reflection and enables gardeners sometimes to forget their everyday problems, says João Lopes, the user-group spokesperson of the Custóias garden.

Participation based on sharing



Fig. 4. Ana Lopes, Project Coordinator

There is a strong community dynamic throughout the LIPOR kitchen garden network. While the production and management of each plot are individual responsibilities, overall responsibilities are collective and, in some situations, levels of self-organisation come very close to self-management.

The collaborative dimension occurs in three particularly interesting areas: the sharing of agricultural products

between users, the exchange of knowledge, and the organisation of

joint actions which are incorporated within the garden as well as outside, in other recreational contexts.

Trading in products (fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs), rather than their economic value, fundamentally represents a gesture of solidarity, mutual recognition and enhancement of an activity carried out with effort and persistence.

The exchange of knowledge between users allows a reformulation of pre-established social roles and validates the adult learner within this life context. Users who are almost permanent, sometimes older people, serve as advisors and facilitators to others. Younger people present new ideas and experiments that are accompanied with great interest and also much questioning. The field of shared knowledge is a good platform for exchange between generations. Collective initiatives, other than those focused on the garden, reinforce the sense of group and cooperative spirit. In the community garden of Custóias (Matosinhos), the user group considered it necessary to build a protected space for social and leisure activities, and it was the sum of all input – in cash and labour – that made this communal job happen.

The mentoring element – key to success

LIPOR has created a Central Team to counsel and support the entire kitchen garden network. A coordinator, a trainer and a technical support manager form the team, assisted by two professional farmers who handle the work and requalification of gardens according to a predetermined plan. These two workers are also a timely support when there are emergencies. This permanent core team works in cooperation with the official representatives of local authorities and other organisations, who receive regular feedback, thereby sharing the decisions that must be taken.

LIPOR's technical supervision involves initial training, support visits, making professional gardening and composting professionals available, recycling training, evaluations and decision-making, as a group, on the situation of each garden. 'Without the encouragement and supportive spirit of the LIPOR team, the kitchen gardens would very quickly have lost their positive influence on local communities and the people who attend them, because they are subject to very strict rules,' is the opinion of local government officials who find an added value in the partnership with LIPOR. The initial training lasts for 18 hours and is just a starting point for a learning path that is followed mainly through self-training and through interaction with other users. Recycling training courses are conducted throughout the year and since the programme began more than 10 000 people have taken part.

Eduardo Martins of the Therapeutic Community of Meilão stresses the training topics related to organic farming and strategies to remove chemicals from the production



Fig. 5. The composter, an essential element of the community gardens (photo CR, 2011)

aimed at promoting self-assessment. The system would certainly benefit from an assessment which puts the responsibility on the various stakeholders and direct beneficiaries in particular.

A mosaic of interests and sense of participation

In each garden, there are different motivators and ways of engaging, and a wide range of results depending on the garden's context and composition. Each garden is a particular case. There emerge, however, from the LIPOR experience, outline characteristics which offer a typological framework for the gardens around the following key words: neighbourhood living, subsistence, leisure, therapy, enterprise, social life, school. There are gardens which focus on supporting the person, even if the operating model is based on the group, cooperation and sharing. The result is focused on well-being, social relationships and the environment. The products of the land are for individual or family benefit, or for bartering between users.

The council of Maia (a community on the periphery of Porto) conducts interviews to assess user satisfaction, and has stories of entire families that mention the importance of the garden and collective production in the life of the family. One woman says that for over 25 years she never talked much with her daughter and the garden has enabled them to get to know each other better.

There is a group of gardens (therapy-based, schools and organisations) where the collective oversees its operation. Then there are schools that organise gardens on an educational basis. There is even a school system that is engaged in a programme called 'Waste-free Schools' which brings together a dozen schools. This scholastic component for children is of major importance in any strategy for information, awareness and training on environmental issues, as well as eating habits and consumption in general. It runs very focused activities – games, drama, eco-games, workshops, mobile stands, summer camps, 'eco-tech' – as well as visits to Horta da Formiga which are the most popular and busiest of all the educational activities. The organisations (TECMAIA is a business centre, CICCOPN is the training centre for building trades, MBA Nobrinde an advertising company) bring together the gardens' organisational development strategies and turn them into anti-stress shelters. Sometimes the circumstances and age of those involved is of great importance. At MBA Nobrinde difficulties arose because of the increasingly difficult reconciliation between the activity in the garden and the image and comfort issues in the offices.

Kitchen gardens have a very collective sense and expectations have implications on income and the management costs of hostel accommodation. This is the case with Albergues Nocturnos do Porto, a social care hostel which uses the produce of the land to reduce the cost of meals and even has a business development strategy in order to enter the commercial market with its own trademark. This is a project where

the garden is the starting point for a self-sufficiency strategy to be developed over time.

Similarly to the Therapeutic Community of Meilão, all daily meals are cooked with garden produce and the management of quantity and quality are the responsibility of all group members.

The subsistence kitchen garden at Creustins – which is reserved for unemployed people who are in very difficult circumstances – is the exception in authorising the sale of produce, which can be sold on the local market and become the basis of an income. This option does not exist in any other gardens in neighbourhoods, schools, businesses or other organisations.



Fig. 6. Tool sheds (photo CR, 2011)



Fig. 7. Kitchen garden in Albergues Nocturnos do Porto (photo CR, 2012)

Risks and challenges for the next cycle

According to Rui Monteiro, Director of CCDRN – the decentralised administration that coordinates territorial policies for the Northern Portugal region – the objectives and public policies that will shape local government in coming years – replacing investments in infrastructure and social, sporting and cultural facilities – are largely very similar to those of Horta à Porta. Social policies will be more intangible, with a large dose of social concern, which will maintain a strong connection to the land and public space and will meet very diverse social needs.

At this level we will need a major change in attitude, and we may witness a paradigm shift brought about by the changing outlook of local elected officials and policy-makers towards a phenomenon that has barely been considered as a productive space or a global proposition. This is the case with community gardens, which can first be adopted as immediate solutions to social support policies, and secondly as an advanced solution to green policies and the protection of biodiversity, having local people and communities at their core.

Another challenge is the establishment of decentralised support systems that will only depend on LIPOR at a very strategic level and for concerted global action. This urgent task requires the systematisation of the model as well as the creation of transfer tools, neither of which are yet available.

The other consequence of a more decentralised support system will be the animation of partnerships with means that are more in line with the network's current scale and size. Informal and formal ties closely linking partners are a real added value. In the short term, other means need to be adopted to strengthen the sense of empowerment and to ensure the broad participation of all partners in a global network.

With regard to the transfer of this practice to the Urban Agglomeration of Porto, existing organisations must be involved, such as AMP and Primus, the development agency of the Porto region that has a well-defined dialogue with local communities and whose current strategy includes building a competitive image for Porto and its region.

A final challenge for the future cycle of the programme is the networking of the network itself, that is to say, establishing operational links with other producer groups (as is the case of the PROVE programme) and other larger-scale solutions in the field of organic agriculture, as will be the case of public policy regarding the organisation of land holdings.

Conclusion

Porta à Horta has won a very special place as an initiative of the so-called *new rurality*, primarily through the trust that permeates all the relationships between partners and users of the programme. This is due to two fundamental factors: the human element which inspired the programme developers to put the individual at its centre, and the coherence that LIPOR shows in its activities regarding the protection of the environment and sustainable development.

The project is a great success, its reputation is well-known and it regularly receives public recognition through awards at the highest level. Its image is generally



Fig. 9. Fernando Leite, President of LIPOR, the Greater Porto Metropolitan Waste Management Service (Photo CR, 2012)

associated with very concrete problem-solving and people's well-being. This is attributable primarily to the programme's not-for-profit model. Moving forward, the programme will need to cope with pressures related to complete independence from government and profitability in relation to the open market, repositioning the programme's economic priorities and undermining its social vocation.

The mentoring approach is the principal added-value of the programme and represents its distinctive element. Training, visits, help, advice: a framework to create the conditions for the systematic progression of the project's participants.

The missing element in the system is the attitude of discipline, ethos, need and responsibility that make each allotment, each piece of land, a battle to be won daily in order for the whole system to be maintained and grow even more. The challenge of the near future relates to various options for decentralising the support system, knowing that this policy will bring a new dynamic: LIPOR's central role will mature into promoting more strategic functions, and trust and closeness must be maintained as a central element of the programme, through consistent and creative animation of the network.

Popular participation and local ownership is very significant. The partners are very involved and some have developed examples of self-responsibility and decentralisation of local management operations. The trend, however, towards formalising the dynamic of empowerment is felt at two levels: political and technical reports can evolve in the direction of a more comprehensive and less bilateral network, and user participation can become more organised and comprehensive throughout the territory and not simply within each individual kitchen garden.



Fig.10. The garden in Alfândega da Fé – a transfer of experience

The identification of the Porta à Horta programme as the basis for the development of public policies within the territorial initiatives for sustainable development justifies further intervention by coordinating bodies such as CCDRN, AMP and PRIMUS. This will certainly add considerable value to the project and is an opportunity to give practical meaning to the principle of participation (bottom-up dynamics) in defining territorial public policies.

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