

# Building an urban-rural platform

**In Ecuador, the benefits of a healthy food system are becoming luxuries beyond the reach of the urban and rural poor. The modern market has come between urban-based consumers and rural-based producers. Intermediaries control distribution and prices while charging a lot for their services. These transactions affect both the grower and the consumer, who continue to suffer unfair prices, poor product quality and harmful consequences to the environment.**

Emma Kirwan

Since 1987, a movement known as the *canastas comunitarias* has countered the harmful consequences of modern markets. “*Canasta*” means “basket,” and represents the basic food share that all citizens should have the right to access. The most impressive aspect of this movement is its grassroots-based origin: a movement born from necessity. In a country where national and local governments consistently fail to deliver food security measures, the *canastas comunitarias* provide a social safety net for marginalised populations. This is especially true for those facing acute risks of reduced food availability and limited income generating opportunities. The movement strives to make healthy food affordable for low-income city dwellers through community-based processes and direct relationships between consumers and agroecological producers (see Box 1).

Essentially, the *canastas comunitarias* are urban consumer groups formed by neighbourhood ties or linked through churches, clubs or universities. For example, in Guayaquil, a group of university students formed a *canasta* to contribute to their families’ sustenance, while Machala’s *canasta* was started by a religious association. Their objective for affordable, healthy food is achieved through a basic process: participants pool funds together to make bulk purchases in the public marketplace, which are then divided among the families in the group and results in substantial savings.

In 1987, a church group of 25 families founded the first *canasta comunitaria* in Riobamba. However, in 1999, the group disbanded for unspecified reasons. This coincided with a severe economic crisis and dramatic inflation. The *canasta* model was urgently reinstated in response to aggravated poverty and limited access to healthy food. In 2000, seven families in Riobamba formed the *Canasta Comunitaria Utopía*. Over the next two years, word of their experience had spread and stirred interest on a national scale. An array of visitors, ranging from non-profit organisations to extended family members and local government representatives, visited Utopía to learn how to replicate the model in their respective regions.

Since 2000, the movement has steadily gained momentum. It has been reconstructed and adapted to geographically and demographically distinct cities, including Otavalo, Guayaquil, Cuenca, Machala, Santo Domingo and Ibarra. It includes groups composed of nearly 1500 consumers, 600 agro-ecological farming families and several supporting organisations. Quito’s *Canasta Comunitaria El Carmen* demonstrates the movement’s



Photo: Emma Kirwan

**Producers displaying their goods at the *Primer Encuentro de las Canastas Comunitarias de Quito*, a fair held by Quito’s consumer network in November 2007.**

dramatic growth: through word of mouth and a radio programme, the *canasta* increased from 25 families in 2002 to 640 families in 2005. It was then forced to divide into several smaller groups. The national network was formalised as the *Red Tierra y Canasta* at a convention in April 2008.

With heightened success, the movement has attracted attention from political entities and the media, who are interested in the model as a viable means against food insecurity. Local governments have recently launched their own *canasta* groups or channeled funds through local organisations to do so. Likewise, international non-profit organisations such as Heifer, SwissAid, and World Neighbors are intrigued with the movement’s implications for rural-based development and are increasingly willing to commit financial and personal support.

## **How do consumers benefit?**

Members of a *canasta comunitaria* can gain access to healthier food at lower costs through their community organisations. Financial transparency ensures that participating families are confident in the organisation and management of the communal fund. Members are responsible for all transactions, including purchases, sales and market analyses, which are

# for food security

often published for *canasta* members. While credit options are still rare, certain groups reserve a percentage of the communal fund for provisional credit if a family cannot pay. Due to careful and deliberate co-operation, consumers have managed to reduce food costs. The price of a *canasta* share varies between groups depending on several factors: the number of people per group, number of products per share, financial capacity of the participants, administrative and logistical costs and local market prices (reflecting transportation costs and intermediary chains). Despite these distinctions, participants throughout the country have generally concluded that since becoming a member, the greatest change and gain that they have experienced is economic security. In this case, affordable prices directly affect food security and nutrition.

Ecuador is the seventeenth most biodiverse country in the world, home to over 80 native potato varieties. Despite this, the diet of the local population is based on rice, one potato variety ('Superchola'), wheat, corn, and is supplemented with processed foods. Through wholesale buying, the *canasta comunitaria* affords poor urban families with more nutritious options; the basket includes a range of fresh fruits, vegetables, and legumes that has become increasingly varied over time. As a result, consumers introduce new food products into their home and are encouraged to learn new recipes through workshops and trials. Consequently, consumers have the power to recover culinary traditions and local plant varieties that are being lost.

## The quality of food reflects the quality of community

A national study conducted in May 2008 by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo* estimated that the "basic

monthly food share" for an urban family of four is US\$ 170.44. The average income, however, only permits US\$ 104.65 to be spent on food. This suggests that consumers must buy cheap, processed foods that offer little nutritional value. However, as a collective unit, urban consumers present themselves and poor farmers with a unique opportunity for reclaiming basic rights to food security and economic stability. Based on food spending estimates, the total urban population has US\$ 8.7 million in spending power. This could have a great impact on the national consumption trends, and influence agricultural production (of which at least 80 per cent is in the hands of small-scale growers).

As the *canastas comunitarias* increasingly save on their food purchases, consumers are beginning to wonder where their food comes from. Questions arise, such as: "What is the point of saving if we are eating food produced with chemicals?", "Where are we currently spending our food dollars, and who should be receiving our money?" Over time, the groups have sought more direct relationships with small-scale growers interested in "healthier" on-farm production. Through farm visits, group members learn about the realities of agro-ecological farming. They gradually accept that natural products differ from commercial varieties in size and appearance, are often smaller or scarred by insects, but usually richer in flavour. When *Canasta Comunitaria Utopía* received its first order of rainbow chard from a local farmer, consumers were thrilled by its radical colours. Farmers were equally excited by this newfound interest. One grower admitted that, "at 60 years old, this is the first time I have delivered my product into the hands of the person who will eat it, the first time that I have looked into their eyes, that I have met them in person". The majority

## Box 1. How the process works: The *Canasta Comunitaria Utopía*

The *Canasta Comunitaria Utopía* is made up of about 80 families from the city of Riobamba, in central Ecuador. The process is organised once every two weeks. Products are sourced from the local market and about a half dozen farming families. To enter, families must pay a US\$ 1.00 inscription fee. Here is how the *canasta* works:

- **Thursday:** Every other Thursday, participants pay for their basket in advance (US\$ 7.50, which includes US\$ 0.20 for administrative activities and complimentary events) and drop off a large sack or basket to be filled with their products.
- **Friday:** A rotating team studies prices in the local markets to work out the budget and finalise the shopping list for Saturday's purchases.
- **Saturday:** A selected group of purchasers, ranging between 25 to 30 family representatives, carry out the work under the guidance of one of 6 rotating leaders. If volunteers fail to arrive on their assigned day, they must pay a fine.

A typical Saturday looks like this:

**6.30am** Volunteers (men, women, and children alike) arrive at the *canasta* site, a street the town council has granted them permission to occupy. The leader divides the volunteers into two groups. One group will manage the funds and make the purchases specified in Friday's study, while the second group prepares the site for receiving, dividing, and packing the products.

**7 am** Equipment is set up for the *canasta* activities. Weighing scales, tents, tarps, stools, containers, and plastic shopping bags are necessary

for protecting products and accurately sorting, weighing, dividing, and packing the products.

**8 am** The purchasing group returns in a rented pick-up truck with wholesale purchases. The products are unloaded and a brief refreshment is provided. At the same time, agro-ecological producers arrive to directly deliver their goods.

**8.30 am – 11 am** A whirlwind of activity begins. Volunteers split into three groups organised around the dividing the products: sorting, weighing, and packing. First, the total weight of each product is divided by the number of family shares, after which each group carries out its respective responsibilities. Though this continues in assembly line fashion for 2-3 hours, the work is hardly tedious. Laughter and conversation flow easily among the members, and every five minutes a new vegetable or fruit takes the stage.

**11 am – 12 pm** The sacks are packed, nearly toppling over with fresh food. A second refreshment is offered before the equipment is cleared, leaving only the sacks and baskets lining the street in neat rows.

**12 pm – 1 pm** Consumers arrive to collect their pre-paid food shares.

The *Canasta Comunitaria Utopía* is carefully run by a rotating group. This group manages a series of simple tables to record contact information, volunteer schedules, payments, bills, total and specific spending, and bi-weekly financial analyses and comparisons. Because the members of *Utopía* actively participate, individuals are only required to volunteer two to three times per year. This means they save significant time that they would otherwise have to spend in the marketplace.

of groups will continue to prioritise economy over quality. However, the experiences of the groups that are moving towards responsible food systems will serve as a learning process for forming direct markets between *canastas* and producers.

Where direct relationships exist, the *canastas comunitarias* seek to ensure that producers receive fair prices (see Box 2). By purchasing directly from local farms, transportation costs are decreased and often assumed by the group. Frequently, producers and consumers meet to agree upon prices, and farmers benefit from arrangements that provide a rare degree of stability.

In addition, *canastas* work with producers to improve product quality and manage competition. For example, the *Canasta Comunitaria Utopía*, in Riobamba, received an order of poor quality grains from a long-standing producer group. At the same time, they were offered better quality grains from a new group. Contrary to market rationale where ties would be severed with the former supplier, the *canasta* decided to alternate their suppliers while giving feedback and support to help the original provider improve the quality of its products. As a result, the producer group eventually raised its standards and has since

### Box 2. Potato producers in Carchi

Farmer Field School graduates from Ecuador's northernmost province of Carchi have been working to decrease pesticide use on their potato crops, in particular the use of highly toxic insecticides. Through their research, they have identified a number of promising alternatives. These include new, precocious potato varieties that are resistant to disease and can be harvested before major insect pests complete their lifecycle. While resembling popular varieties and offering higher nutritional content, these new varieties are not yet popular. Consumers continue to demand 'Superchola', a slow growing variety that requires heavy pesticide applications.

The *Canasta Comunitaria El Carmen* in Quito invited Euler Fweltala, a FFS leader from Carchi, to visit and present evidence showing that pesticides were causing serious health problems for farmer and their families in Carchi. Euler explained that his group had devised alternatives, but they needed help in creating markets for their new potatoes. He told the group that the prices in the Quito market (about US\$ 12 per 50 kg sack) were double the price paid to farmers in their fields. He said that provided a secure market, his group could deliver a truckload of potatoes every two weeks for US\$ 10 per sack, allowing farmers to earn US\$ 8 per sack, a 30 per cent increase over what they were presently paid. Moreover, he could guarantee that the potatoes would be free of highly toxic pesticides and that no middle person would intervene to take profits away from his group of smallholder farmers. After negotiation, the *Canasta* and Euler agreed to a contract: a truckload of potatoes every two weeks for a price of US\$ 10 per sack. This was a win-win situation for both growers and consumers!



Photo: Emma Kirwan

**A member of Cuenca's *Canasta Comunitaria* collects her biweekly *canasta*. Behind her, products are divided into shares and ready to be loaded into the sacks.**

succeeded in entering organic niche markets on a domestic and international scale. Other consumer groups, such as the *Canasta Comunitaria Zapallo Verde*, alternate their suppliers in order to maintain variety and involve several producers at a time. The *canastas comunitarias* offer a creative social learning space where consumers and producers can build more responsible relationships that lead to reciprocal and stable economies, more nutritious food and a healthier environment.

### Plans for the future

As the *canastas comunitarias* gain momentum, diverse projects have been proposed for building local economies around environmentally sound production. A priority of this movement is to increase consumer awareness about the origin of food in order to create a mutually beneficial farm-to-city market system. Consumer-based proposals include nutrition workshops and cooking classes, farm visits and exchange programmes, and educational fairs. Equally, small-scale producers must identify strategies for organised production and commercialisation in order to meet new demands, in both quantity of production and quality. Nationally, the *canastas comunitarias* subscribe to wider social and political networks, such as the *Colectivo Agroecológico*. They have also become active in nationwide campaigns to promote affordable and healthy food systems. A unique opportunity for including the urban and rural poor in an otherwise exclusive market has been created by the *canastas comunitarias*, and over time their effort has become articulated as part of an international "food sovereignty" movement. ■

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