Handpicked: Stories from the Field

Season 1, Episode 2: “I Can Seed Something Here, I Have Land”: Intersectionality, Urban Agriculture, and Community Benefit in Quito, Ecuador

Featuring Laine Young in conversation with Alexandra Rodriguez

# **Transcript**

**Speakers**

Amanda Di Battista: **AD**

Laine Young: **LY**

Alexandra Rodriguez: **AR**

Erick Fay: **EF**

{[Sounds of marketplace, including voices, music, and street traffic]}

**LY**: Quito, the bustling capital city of Ecuador, is nestled in a valley, and surrounded by picturesque mountains and active volcanos. Like many urban centers around the world, Quito has seen an influx of people moving in from the surrounding countryside in the last few decades. This global movement of populations from rural to urban poses significant challenges for local food systems everywhere. But in Quito, the unique risks posed by its geography coupled with a reliance on food from elsewhere, make the food system especially vulnerable to shocks and stressors. Combine that vulnerability with high rates of poverty and a complicated social landscape, and you’ve got the potential for dangerously high levels of food insecurity, especially in marginalized groups. In this episode of *Handpicked*, we’ll explore how one participatory urban agriculture project in Quito, is working with the most vulnerable populations to find ways to grow food directly in the city, and to make Quito’s food system more resilient.

{[Intro Music]}

**LY**: Hi! Welcome back to *Handpicked: Stories from the Field*, a podcast by the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. I’m Laine Young.

**AD**: And I’m Amanda Di Battista, and welcome to the first episode of our second season. We’re so happy to be back in our hosting chairs, and to walk you through another crop of research projects associated with the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. I am particularly excited about this episode, because we’re going to be talking about Laine’s research. Right, Laine?

**LY**: Yes! I am so excited to share some of the work I’ve been doing with community partners in Quito!

**AD**: Awesome! Maybe before we get into the details of your project, you can tell me a little bit more about the approach you take in this research?

**LY**: Sure, I work with AGRUPAR, an organization that trains farmers in urban food growing. In my research I look at urban agriculture projects using an intersectional feminist analysis, which is an approach that recognizes that gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, ability and a whole host of other things come together in complex ways to impact each person differently. I know it sounds a bit complicated, but basically, I ground my analysis of urban food growing projects in the lived experiences of the participants of a program like AGRUPAR, that helps me to better understand the impact of power relations on people’s lives, and more specifically, how they experience urban agriculture. That experience includes the access to and control of resources and markets, bargaining and decision-making control, division of labor, access to education and knowledge, and having control over the resources necessary to grow food in an urban setting.

An important part of my work is helping to share these research stories in more meaningful ways.

**AD**: So, how did you get connected with the folks in Quito?

**LY**: Well, the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems is a member of the RUAF global partnership on sustainable urban agriculture and food systems. They approached Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer, Director of the Center, to embark on some research together. I was lucky enough to get connected to the AGRUPAR project and my community partner, Alexandra Rodriguez from the Economic Promotion Agency in Quito, called CONQUITO. Alexandra is responsible for the participatory urban agriculture project, AGRUPAR.

**AD**: So, tell me more about the situation in Quito.

**LY**: Well, Quito is the capital city of Ecuador. The main urban area has a population of roughly 1.6 million people, but the entire municipal district of Quito is much larger and that includes almost 2.2 million people. Around 70% of the population lives in urban spaces. Quito’s food system relies heavily on imports, and they only produce about 5% of the food that the population needs. The city has many vulnerable groups with about a 30% poverty rate—which is really high. Also, many children in Quito experience chronic malnutrition.

**AD**: So, you’ve mentioned the term “urban agriculture,” what is that?

**LY**: Urban agriculture is the practice of growing food or raising animals in the city.

**AD**: Like rooftop and balcony gardens?

**LY**: Yeah, those are some examples. Urban agriculture can also be public community gardens where urban residents rent a plot, or even having a small veggie garden or raising chickens in your backyard. Or it could be much more technical, like vertical farming or using hydroponic systems.

**AD**: Oh, okay. So, I can think of quite a few examples of urban agriculture where I live, but what does it look like in Quito?

**LY**: Well, Quito’s high poverty rates contribute to high levels of food insecurity. So, the aim of urban agriculture in the city is often to provide nutrition and income for the individual growers. So, it’s less about gardening as a hobby or a trend like we see in Canada

**AD**: Oh, okay, that makes sense. So, how exactly does the AGRUPAR project help with the situation in Quito?

**LY**: Well, AGRUPAR began in 2002 with support from the RUAF global partnership and was designed to help the most vulnerable members of the population to increase their nutrition, promote health, increase income and promote empowerment.

AGRUPAR trains urban farmers in organic growing, provides start up materials, facilitates organic certification for the growers, provides affordable ongoing technical assistance, and runs local organic markets within the city called *bioferias,* where the participants can sell their produce, meat, and value-added goods. I sat down with our community partner Alexandra Rodriguez in the field to talk more about this. Our interpreter, Erick Fay, will also be a part of the recordings, so you will hear his voice from time to time. Here’s Alexandra.

**AR**: Hi, my name is Alexandra Rodriguez, head of AGRUPAR project through CONQUITO. Urban agriculture, in our context, contributes to the food security of the population with the greatest possible food sovereignty, through the implementation of orchards that allow improve income, generate employment, improve environmental management, increase sustainability and resilience, and promote inclusion and social integration. In other words, the orchard is not the end, but a means to build the base of many benefits. There are different motivations to practice urban agriculture, such as a subsistence recreation, education, social inclusion and integration, intrapreneurship, resistance and subversion. Resistance and subversion to the current and sustainable food system.

**LY**: I asked her to tell me a bit more about the history of AGRUPAR.

**AR**: Urban agriculture has a long trajectory in the city, a long history. It was institutionalized in 2002, and then, this project has been implemented with different and complementary approaches; such as social inclusion, economic development, environment, health and responsible consumption, resilience, and recently, I think two years ago, this project has been a catalyst and a change agent for the city to get together many actors of the food system, and share the results of the diagnosis of the food system in Quito. And inviting everybody to be part of a multistakeholder Platform, we call it Pacto Agro-Alimentaire de Quito (PACT), and analyze and provide information and make proposals for the construction of a food policy for the city for the first time in the history, in the country, and in the city.

**AD**: So, it sounds like it’s grown to be more than just a project that helps people participate in urban agriculture?

**LY**: Yeah, AGRUPAR has led to the development of Quito and Ecuador’s first food policy, and has promoted the importance of urban agriculture to the resilience planning of the city, and to plans for mitigation of climate change and other environmental issues. Alexandra also told me that urban agriculture has been the starting point for the city to begin to think about food beyond urban agriculture only. She said that it's not only gardens, or increased food production or incomes, but that urban agriculture has led to more thinking about production, distribution, marketing, consumption, and all the links of the food system.

**AD**: So, urban agriculture in Quito has been a catalyst for food system change across the city?

**LY**: Yeah, not only does the project help vulnerable members of the community, it works to promote changes at a more macro scale.

Alexandra also told me about the cultural importance of food, and how that links to food sovereignty.

**AR**: Yes, in the context, in the Andean context, it’s very important to talk about sovereignty. Because we have opportunities to produce our food culturally appropriate for our population, and not depend on the food of the external imports in other countries, and by means of urban agriculture, we are sure that is - - that it is possible. It’s a little way that show that it is possible for the country, and it is a way to think that we can make things internally. For me, it's an - - it’s an opportunity to empower women, to empower young people, and to recover knowledge, to respect this knowledge from the ground. Yes, this is the term. Yes? and it has been an opportunity for the women to be free, to find a way of life. To take its own salary, decide about its salary, to be manager of these incomes, and decide what kind of [EF: expenses], expenses they want to do.

**AD**: So, Food Sovereignty is a concept we talked a lot about in our first season. *La Via Campasina* defines food sovereignty as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems." It’s really interesting to think about food sovereignty not only in terms of empowerment, but also in terms of access to culturally appropriate food.

**LY**: Yeah, one of the benefits for participants of AGRUPAR is that they are provided with farmer training that not only shows them methods to grow organic food in urban settings, but it helps to pass along traditional Andean knowledge to grow traditional foods like Yuca that newer generations might not know how to grow anymore. This not only helps connect people to their ancestors, it often increases the nutritional diversity that they consume.

{[Music Break]}

**LY**: Alexandra also told me that, for her, food sovereignty means less reliance on food imports. One of the bigger picture goals that AGRUPAR is working on through the development of food policy, is to shorten the food chains to the city. Because of their proximity to active volcanos, their food supply can be easily cut off if one of them erupts. Increasing self-sufficiency will promote resilience and sovereignty for the residents.

**AD**: Okay, can you give me an example of the kind of work that AGRUPAR is doing to contribute to the development of more integrative food policy throughout the city?

**LY**: Yes! AGRUPAR’s work is recognized internationally and because they are affiliated with the RUAF global partnership, they have the opportunity to work with and learn from cities in other countries also working to improve their food systems. Here’s Alexandra with more about their work with the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact:

**AR**: Right now, we are working in a pilot project of Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Indicators. At the same time, Quito, and Nairobi and Antananarivo are included in this group for this pilot project. Quito choose three indicators. One about governance. Another about sustainable diets. And finally, food waste. We decide, we select these indicators because in this city, these topics are really, really new. We have big gaps of information of sensitive, sensitive? *Sensibilizar?*

**EF**: Eh, awareness.

**AR**: *Sensibilizar*, awareness. It was very important for us at least, in this moment, take a baseline, the context, the diagnosis of the starting point for the city.

**LY**: So, the information that they’re gathering through this multistakeholder platform, and the use of the indicators they’ve chosen for the Milan Pact pilot project that Alexandra just described - governance, sustainable diets, and food waste - will help get food onto the agenda within city policy, like the climate change action plan.

**AD**: Oh interesting, and it’s fascinating to see how an urban agriculture project can lead to policy change.

{[Music Break]}

**AD**: So, we’ve heard about the situation in Quito and the work of AGRUPAR, can you tell me a bit more about what you bring to the work with Alexandra?

**LY**: As with many research projects, the work I do in Quito is multifaceted. Alexandra and her team are interested in assessing the project and expanding it in a way that is less reliant on funding. They hope to move towards more self-sufficiency of the project by building partnerships in the city. So, I bring an intersectional feminist analysis to the project, to try and answer some of those questions and make recommendations moving forward that are based on the experiences of the growers.

**AD**: Is an intersectional feminist approach to urban agriculture research new?

**LY**: Well, it’s not necessarily new but it is evolving. And it is an excellent way to analyze urban agriculture, because it focuses on the intersectional experiences of the participants in the project, and the power relations in society that impact those experiences.

**AD**: Okay. Tell me more about intersectionality. What does the term mean, exactly?

**LY**: Good question! The term is always evolving, but was originally coined in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw, a Black lawyer who was working with Black women in the criminal justice system at the time. She explored how these women’s racial and gendered experiences were interconnected and could not be examined separately.

Intersectionality reminds us that there are no universal experiences. While all women face oppression from the patriarchy, women of color are also impacted by racism, thus their experiences will be much different than a white woman’s.

People’s gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, age and other social categories, as well as the power relations present, impact their experiences within society and need to be considered more holistically in order to understand the experiences.

**AD**: Okay, that makes sense. But what does it mean in the context of urban agriculture?

**LY**: Well, if a woman has little control over the decisions of her household, she may not have the power to grow food at all, let alone be an active participant in an urban agriculture project. Quite a bit of research has been done on gender and urban agriculture because women are important actors within the food system—they are most often the people who are doing the growing, getting, processing, selling, and preparing of food.

And, while there is lots of research on the ways that gender impacts how people can participate in the food system—or how much power they have—there has been less research done on the way that gender, class, race, and other factors come together to impact an individual’s power within those same systems. That intersectional analysis has been largely missing.

**AD**: Okay, so, each of the participants experiences urban agriculture a little differently depending on their identity?

**LY**: Yes, and the different parts of people’s identities intersect in ways that significantly affect how they experience the world and how much power they have in society. That’s why an intersectional feminist approach is so crucial.

**AD**: Right, okay. Can you give us an example of what this looks like?

**LY**: Sure. Imagine that there are two women in the same city that are both participating in an urban agriculture project. They receive the same training, access to resources, and new opportunities to grow food. But then let’s imagine that these women belong to different classes, and that the city’s produce market only allows vendors of a certain class to sell their food. While these women would both be given the same resources and opportunities to grow food through the project, their experiences would be totally different. Without an intersectional analysis, we miss a critical piece of the puzzle—in this case, class—that makes gaining an income from a food growing project impossible for one of the women.

I think that focusing on intersectionality in assessing urban agriculture projects allows for a more nuanced analysis that can tell us a better story about the experiences of the participants, and that allows for meaningful changes and adaptations to the project based on this knowledge.

**AD**: Really interesting. So, does AGRUPAR work only with women?

**LY**: While women are the main participants of AGRUPAR, there are other populations that the project targets. Here’s Alexandra with more:

**AR**: We have a program specific designed for, for urban agricultures but with emphasis in women. Because they are the engine of this project, of their families. The woman is who prepare food, who produce food, who take decisions about how it feed their families. And this project contribute, for example, giving knowledge about how to produce better with our agroecological organic line. And how to prepare food, nutritional food, and how to entrepreneur, and how to sell the surplus production. And for the most of the women, never in her life have the chance of to fill the business. For example, in the most vulnerable places, the woman is under the orders of her husband, and they don't have voice. By means of this project, they would have voice, take decisions, participate in many spaces with another woman interchange knowledge, experience, good practices, and get together, they make friends. This is a way to empower the woman.

And then with knowledge specifically, for example, they are more - they increase, raise awareness about climate change, use of the water, use of land, [EF: waste]. They are an agent of change in their communities.

84% represent women head of household. And then young people, children, jails, families, neighbor, neighbor or neighborhoods, health centers, child care centers, disabled, elderly, among others. And any citizen in Quito could be part of this project. But we emphasize our intervention, in the most vulnerable places of the city, the places that you can find 47% of chronic child malnutrition, for example. We emphasize our intervention in these places, not only to income, to improve incomes, not only to improve access to healthy food. As I said before, it’s an opportunity to grow in many, many aspects of the human being.

**LY**: I asked Alexandra if she found that implementing an urban agriculture project in an area, improved the whole neighborhood. Here is what she had to say.

**AR**: Yes, of course. It's like … [\*in Spanish\* *How do I say sprial?]* [EF: spiral]. It’s like a spiral? Yes. You have the gardening in the middle, and the benefits around, yes, exactly. It grow, and grow and grow because the people knows that in their neighborhood, having one place with healthy food and provide healthy food for everybody, for example. You can buy directly. You contribute to this family, as a grower, and the benefit of this food is for you, and your family also.

{[Music break]}

**AD**: You’ve told me about some of AGRUPAR’s projects, can you tell me about some of the people they work with?

**LY**: Sure, I actually asked Alexandra if she had any stories to share that would help to illustrate the project’s impact on people in Quito. She told me about a single mother who used urban agriculture to empower herself to leave a violent relationship.

**AR**: That woman has three children and her husband was working off construction, and she, a long, long time ago she helps, she helps with her husband, his, her husband at work. And he done ... [\*in Spanish\* *How do I say he was mean?*]

**EF**: He was really, really rough to her.

**AR**: Yes. And she only asked money for the, for her, for the family, for buy food, for … and one day she knows about urban agriculture, for example. And she started to participate in the community garden in the area where she lived. And then she decide ‘ah, I can seed something because I have land!’ So, she start to seed a beautiful garden and then she implement, with helps of this project and small greenhouses, And then with a... [*\*in Spanish\* benefit?]*

**EF**: Benefit?

**AR**: With the money that she wins of the activity. For sell tomato and other things, you know, she decided to implement another greenhouses but with her incomes, with her money. And then another. And then she wants to buy irrigation sets. And then, she think ‘I live in a place surrounded of forests and flowers, maybe I can put bees.’ And she put bees! And she started a business really, really interesting. She had too, many, many boxes of bees, and greenhouses and chickens and hens, and many elements of the garden. Too much diversity. And then one day she win more than her husband. And her husband hate her. I think that. I don't know... It’s a ... [\*in Spanish\* *How do I say this in English?*]

 **EF**: She was really, really proud that this woman told him, told her that she, she doesn't care if the man goes on and abandon her, because she can support the kids and she can, she can take care of the whole family.

It's a shame that the family doesn't understand. {[AR: \*in Spanish\* *yes!*]}

Okay, so that's, that's again that's cultural think. The family couldn't stay together because of, uh, of the chauvinism of the husband and the surrounds, and they couldn't understand that, how good it was that this woman take, took care of the family, by herself. It's sad that the husband didn't understand that the whole activity surrounding the garden could be a job for both of them, and a good job.

**AD**: That’s an incredible story.

**LY**: Yeah, this woman had to leave her land and is starting over to support her kids, but she has the means to do so. She was not stuck in that situation and she’s able to help herself and her children.

Another example Alexandra shared was of a great, great grandma who uses her participation in the project to support her large family and teach her children and grandchildren new skills.

**AR**: She has a big family, big, big, big family. Too much children, very high poverty. In her house live all the family. Once, I take account, 19 children.{[LY: wow!]}. Yes, this is, it was the situation! For this woman, and for her daughters, and the daughter; the daughters of the daughters of the children of her daughters, yes you know, it’s a really big family. Urban agriculture turns in a big opportunity to eat, to have food every day! Because not always the daughters of - - have work. And the incomes are really, really low. And what about the children, yes? So, urban agriculture was the one, and the main mechanism to access to food. And then she start to sell the surplus production because there's a lot, she has a long, a great land to grow, and she has a surplus produce that sold in some *bioferias* and include her daughters. And then they learn how to make snacks. For example, marmalades and other {[EF: processed]}, processed food. And grow animals. And first of all, complete the options of the diet for the family, and then sell the surplus production. But with too much diversity. And this is the main income for the family. This is the main activity for her, for her daughters, for her {[EF: granddaughters]}, exactly. And this is important because not only would it be equal opportunity it’s, it’s, it's very important because, all the children grow learning how to work in the land, respecting the land, learning to eat healthily, and respecting all the efforts of the grandma.

**AD**: It’s really interesting to hear how the project has impacted these women so substantially.

I bet Alexandra is proud to have worked with these women to empower themselves and build their businesses.

**LY:** Yeah, she speaks about that often. Alexandra is so passionate about what she does, and that shines through in every aspect of her work. I asked her what she likes the most about her job.

**AR**: Wow! The best part of my job. I really enjoy my job. This the reason of my life. By means of this job I have the opportunity to know about the people, about the poor people, to know my city, to know that my city have vulnerable places, to know how the people think, how the people wants, the gaps of the city, all the challenge of the city about the food. It was a great opportunity for me.

**AD**: Well, that’s a nice sentiment to end on. Thanks, Laine, for sharing a little bit about the incredible work happening in Quito.

**LY**: Yes, thanks for listening everyone! We hope you tune in to our next episode.

{[Closing Music]}

**AD**: Please subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen, and maybe share it with a friend! We’d be so grateful if you’d write us a review on iTunes so more people can find the show!

**LY**: Also, you can follow us on twitter at @handpickedpodc, search our name on Facebook to join the group, or send us an e-mail at handpickedpodcast@wlu.ca. A special thanks to Alexandra Rodriguez for sharing her time and expertise with us. And to Erick Fay, for his continued support to my project.

**AD**: This episode was hosted and produced by us, Amanda Di Battista,

**LY**: and Laine Young.

**AD**: Our music is composed by Keenan Reimer-Watts. *Handpicked* is produced with support from The Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, Wilfrid Laurier University, The Balsille School of International Affairs, and The Centre for International Governance Innovation.

**LY**: Please check out our show notes for a bibliography, teaching tools, and links to other relevant information we used to produce the episode. Make sure you check out our website for other ways to engage with us.

We would like to acknowledge that this episode was recorded on the lands of the Quito-Caras people, and produced on the lands of the Neutral, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee people. We encourage you to click the land acknowledgement link in the show notes to learn more.

**AD**: As always, I’m Amanda Di Battista.

**LY**: And I’m Laine Young, and this has been an episode of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems podcast, *Handpicked*.

**AD**: Make sure to tune in next time, for more freshly picked stories from the field!