



## Results of the final phase of the AESOP4food Online Seminar 2023

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Living Lab: Bucharest “Buruiană Community garden”



## Focus and scope of the research

In the sense of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the main aim of my work as a remote student was to support the Bucharest Living-Lab in the challenges and questions they expressed in advance and during the presentations. I aligned my research questions as much as possible with a potential practical use for them. The questions were developed towards the following:

1. How can a community garden/agriculture in the peri-urban area of a big city (in the context of locals still practicing agriculture in an individual and specific traditional manner) look like?
  - 1.1 What are its elements, (power)relations and stakeholders?
  - 1.2 What challenges arise regarding long-term functionality and what are ways of dealing with them?
  - 1.3 What challenges arise regarding the peri-urban location and what are ways of dealing with them?
2. What are good case-study examples of events and activities to attract participants, new members and locals that are starting to learn about the existence and benefits of urban gardening/agriculture?

## Place and context of the research aim

Within the City Region Food System (CRFS) approach that “provides a critical lens for analysing while supporting on-the-ground policy transformation and implementation” (FAO&RUAF 2015) the research sheds particular light on the vision of social inclusion. It focuses on the CRFS-actors “Community Gardens/Agriculture” and especially on social and structural/organisational issues faced by them. In the context of environmental innovation and societal transition (GEELS 2006) it further looks at the role place-based development can play in their first steps from a niche-innovation towards a socio-technical regime.

## Research approach and method

Depending on the question block, the research approach and method has varied. For the first question block it was necessary to find a comparable project. I chose the Andalusian agroecological cooperative “Hortigas”. As Buruiană, Hortigas e.g., is also based in the peri-urban area of a large city and strongly committed to education and socialisation following principles of regenerative agriculture. In both projects consumers and producers of the *place* and the food share responsibility. What can be less well compared is the specific local access to resources and the cultural context. Despite those differences Buruiană can learn from the 18-years-old history of Hortigas regarding long-term functionality and the strategies they have developed to address challenges. Because of my agro-voluntary at Hortigas I could make use of “Friendship as a method”. This means that although I employed “traditional forms of data gathering [...], [my] primary procedures are those [I] use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability” (TILLMANN-HEALY 2003: 734). I choose this method because of the depth of understanding it enables. In addition to the past intensive involvement on site, I chose qualitative guided and problem-centred interviews. I have chosen the founder of the cooperative and a long-term member of the commission dedicated to their information-diffusion. During the interviews we co-used a “Mural”, a shared digital canvas. I informed all my interview-partners verbally about the research-context, their rights, the anonymization of the data, the recording and created space for possible doubts and further questions.

Part of the research on the second question was carried out by literature review with the aim to create a theoretical framework. The other part had the purpose to collect as many good case-study examples as possible. I chose the geographical context of Cologne where I also have an “insider status [...] that

offers [...] unique insights" (OWTON&ALLEN-COLLINSON 2014: 302). At the Assembly of the Cologne-Community-Garden-Network where the food council was also represented, I have arranged a collective brainstorm and group-dialogue to the issue and had contact to the non-present community gardens via Mail.

## Main findings and discussion

Question-Block 1: In the mural (Annex 1) one can see the areas Dúrcal, where the fields are and main resources are based and Granada, where especially the sub-groups live, the food gets mainly distributed, the assembly takes place and the information for the public gets mainly transmitted. A further division describes the external and internal organisation of the cooperative. The internal plane is closer connected to Granada and the external to Dúrcal. The drawn scheme is a snapshot of a system that is in constant motion since its formation.

Although Hortigas is firmly trying to avoid any kind of hierarchical logics, power relations are always hidden somewhere. By asking myself who is defining the scope of their physical and non-material possibilities of action I took a closer look at those actors who were in possession of resources or might influence through laws and regulations and at how the cooperative deals with social power-constructions like patriarchal mechanisms: Local/Political Authorities: As they are an association and have employees who must be covered by social insurance and are working with an employment contract Hortigas has to comply with legal criteria. However, it's still not much power political authorities could exercise with the corresponding legal possibilities. Resource-owners: The different resources (water, land, buildings) are all left to the cooperative under very peculiar and unique conditions, mostly without contracts and money flows and mainly through verbal or traditional agreements. The according risk is medium because it is unlikely that the resources get unexpectedly reclaimed as the handovers arose from mutual knowledge and support. Social power relations like patriarchal mechanisms: Those could intrude into the possibilities of action or the development of ideas and visions. Consequently, patriarchal dynamics and their significance for the cooperative are reflected through structural measures, for instance, via rotatory systems, the working group of new masculinities or the commission "Cuidados" who is dedicated to internal care and awareness. Most power to structural change has got the assembly where decisions are being made by consensus.

For Hortigas I identified five core-challenges regarding long-term functionality and the peri-urban location and ways of dealing with them (Annex 2). For Internal communication/conflict-management Hortigas has implemented the already mentioned commission "Cuidados". Regarding the challenge of being inclusive for their target group (e.g people with low income and students) they offer easy access to and exit from the cooperative and small contribution rates for the vegetables. The question of (non-)inclusiveness is also taken up repeatedly at the assemblies. Because they reject purely profit-driven financial planning they further must find situation-specific and flexible financial solutions and monitoring-strategies. The task of financial accounting and administration is completely taken over by the finance-commission "KAE" which operates in cooperation with the assembly when it comes to bigger questions and changes. Regarding Networking/Agroecology as a political act: Hortigas as a single agroecological project cannot live up to the claim of being transformative and respond to all the requirements of the common good. For a movement you need a network and a broader range of project-models. That's why the external plane of Hortigas consists of a huge variety of activities and allied projects and cooperatives, located in sites from local to global. The last challenge also leads to the last question from the first question-block –The peri-urban Area: The interviews revealed a lot of vantages of the peri-urban area, like the brevity of transport routes or that the city and the surrounding area are becoming more visible to each other. But you also need peri-urban projects for the peri-urban area itself and the same for the city. At this point, the argument of challenge 4 repeats its logic: The

peri-urban area can't be the only field of play if you want a broad transformation towards sustainable CRFS.

Question-Block 2: I embedded the case-study examples into a theoretical framework asking at a meta level: Why and when do people want to interact with their surroundings? The concept of place-based development was able to provide answers. „Place-based development, in contrast to conventional [...] perspectives, is a holistic and targeted intervention [...] for the development of the in-situ community [...]“ (MARKEY 2010: 2). People want to get involved into local processes and activities “depending (among other things) on the level of sense of place (SHAMAI 1991: 355). "Sense of place" can be seen as an umbrella concept of related concepts such as place attachment (SCANNELL & GIFFORD 2009: 1) or regional awareness (WATSON et al. 2013: 65). The roots of this roof concept lie in the notion of "place-making", first introduced in the 1970s by Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte in the USA (WEEDON&ASHLEY 2020: 1ff.). „Place-making (transformation from space to place) refers to the empowering process during which inhabitants of a setting tend to represent, renovate and upgrade their physical surroundings“ (STRYDOM 2014: iv). “Great places” should be: “[well] accessible, [...]comfortable, [...]attract people to participate in activities, [...]environments in which people want to gather and visit again and again” (Project for Public Spaces 2022: 6).

The collected case studies in Cologne can be assigned to two central goals: 1) Internal and 2) External growth through exchange (Annex 3). The first cluster with the aim of developing into a “great place” implies that popular events should have a secondary benefit by being embedded into further topics and social contexts. When it comes to prejudice it is further important to take resistance serious as the history of the people is part of their reality and affects the present. The activities should open up new visions while respecting the past. For the aim of the second cluster of becoming more visible, activities should try to benefit from bigger frames like established platforms for promoting the own events or by docking to larger events and cooperate with e.g., schools, universities, municipalities, other (garden-)initiatives or shops. Finally, an open and present appearance, including spontaneous accessibility and a welcoming culture(/rituals) are crucial to gaining new members. As many educational and fun activities serve both goals the two clusters mustn't be sharply separated.

## Conclusion

Block 1: Based on the similarities and differences between Hortigas and Buruiană the Hortigas-model can give inspirations with their internal and external organisation in the field of tension between the city and the surrounding area, and with their way of making themselves as independent as possible from external influences and concentrating power into the consensus-based assembly. From Hortigas we learn that there should be a bypass strategy for each major challenge such as internal communication and conflict-management, Inclusiveness towards the people you want to reach and financing. For greater resilience and a broader common-good-movement it is important to act within a network and having different fields of play in the city and its region.

Block 2: Educational and Fun Activities with a secondary benefit can help to attract new participants. To also reach people who are starting to learn about the existence/benefits of urban gardening it is important to take possible resistances seriously and to create a history-sensible vision. To keep participants involved and to let the project be a base of a successful collective empowerment it should be possible for everybody to represent themselves and develop and shape the place. For more visibility and external growth, one should exude a welcoming openness and be present in situ. Further, it can be helpful to make use of bigger contexts and to dock to larger events or frames, as well as to create and work within various cooperations.

A reflection of the aspects opened in Block 1 – elements, (power)relations and stakeholders of the own community-garden-model as well as challenges and strategies regarding long-term functionality and the peri-urban location - can also lead to internal and external growth and can strengthen the base for starting the actions presented in Block 2 and to becoming a “great place”.

## Self-reflection

I look back in gratitude on the experiences, feedbacks and contents I have received during the seminar. Although as a remote student I couldn't get a full picture of the living lab and its cultural embeddedness and therefore could not use PAR in its integrity, the co-work with the Living-Lab worked well and I always felt supported. For a future mapping assignment, I would still rather work non-remote. With the liberties that had been given to me in the research process, I was able to practice the new approaches and methods I have learned and simultaneously address the research question from many perspectives. I think I not only got a lot of inspiration by the Buruiană Community Garden but could also give a comprehensive source of inspiration back. While I still feel the tension that always arises within me between a vision I strive for and a status quo I am stuck in, I am glad to have found new allies within the movement towards sustainable City Region Food Systems.

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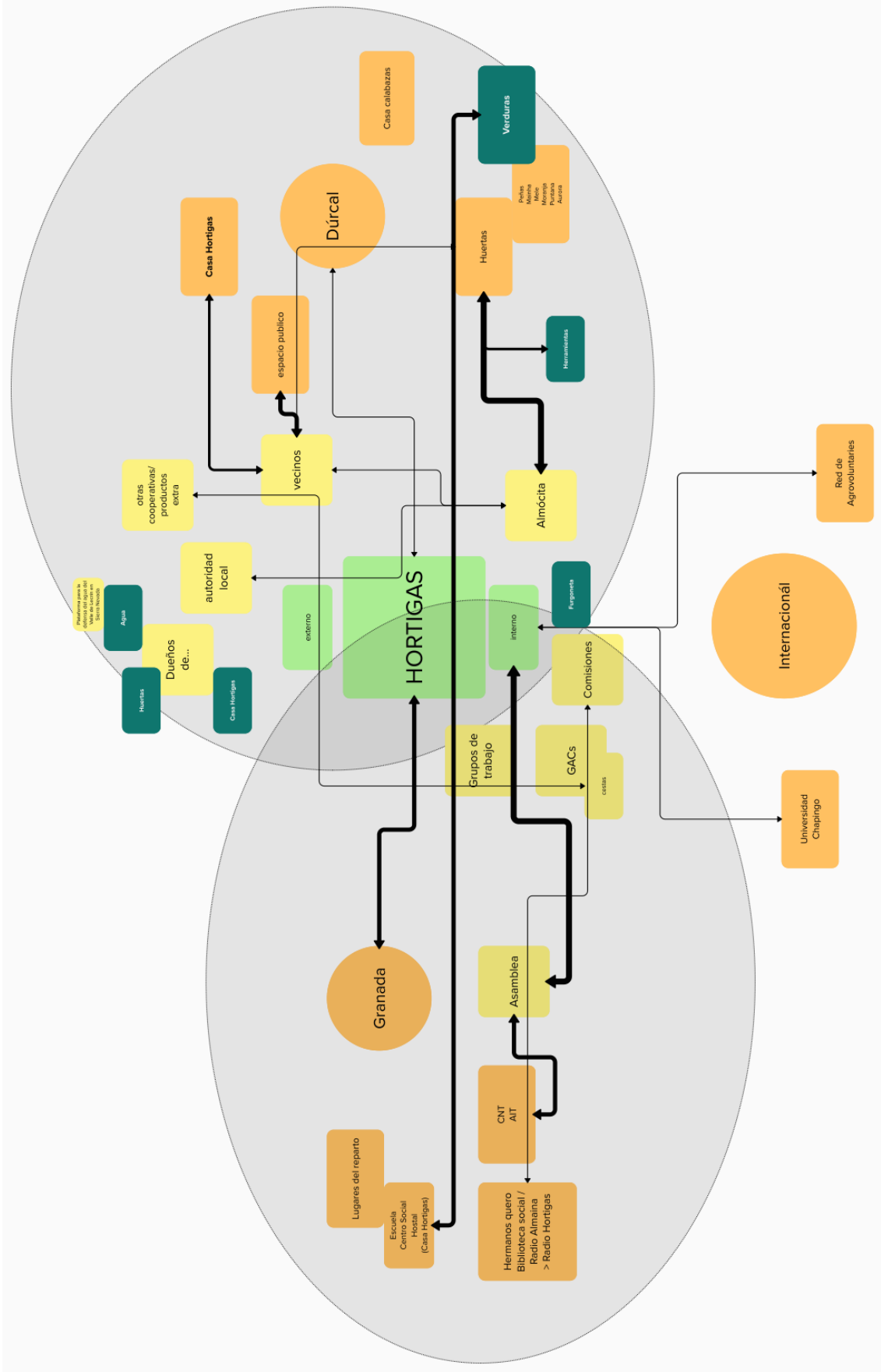
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Annex 1: Elements, (power)relations and stakeholders of Hortigas



Annex 2: Main challenges regarding long-term functionality and the peri-urban location and ways of dealing with them



same logic



Annex 3: Case-study examples of events and activities to attract participants that are starting to learn about the existence and benefits of urban gardening

