

Gardens

Cruz Esperanza Soto Gomez from Canaque, San Marcos, the second Guatemalan community to benefit from the Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios project.

It Takes A Village

text: **Susanne Kennedy**
photography: **Courtesy of Habitat for Humanity Guatemala**

A project between two NGOs and a local community in Central America is hoping to put a halt to chronic malnourishment.



Rural highland communities such as Canaque and Macalajau, where some families live on less than two dollars a day, are particularly vulnerable to poverty and malnutrition. Habitat staff noticed that many had access to arable land which could be used to combat these issues. **opposite page** While Macalajau sector leader, Agustín Pérez Tzrax, believes his community and family gardens could bring economic benefit, his priority is to feed his children well.



When evaluating a 2012 project in the central highland community of Macalajau, El Quiché, Habitat for Humanity Guatemala staff noticed that its villagers ate corn, beans and very little else, and many in the community were chronically malnourished.

Sadly, this is not an uncommon finding in a country that ranks fourth in the world for malnutrition, and where many families, like the ones in Macalajau, live on less than two dollars a day. (It was later confirmed that around 50% of Macalajau children under the age of five suffer chronic malnutrition). Staff also observed that some of these families had access to vacant land that could be used to grow food.

While Habitat Guatemala has many decades of project management experience and considerable local knowledge in Guatemala, agriculture is not an area of expertise. So it was fortuitous when Habitat Guatemala's National Director, Luis Samayoa, received word that the Chilean organisation, América Solidaria, was interested in working in Guatemala on the garden and nutrition theme.

The two organisations began discussions, agreements were drafted and signed, and funding was successfully applied for. The Proyecto de Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios (Family and Community Orchards project) and a three-way partnership, between América Solidaria, Habitat Guatemala and the Macalajau community, were born. The Macalajau pilot yielded such successful results that the project is now being replicated on a larger scale in Canaque, San Marcos.

Josefina Aguilón, a Canaque mother, captures her community's humble hopes for the project: "I dream that when you (project staff) have gone, we will continue to eat and our children to grow."

The Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios model supports

participating families to establish and maintain a designated community garden and to also apply newly acquired eco-agricultural skills in their own family gardens.

"Our job is to transfer knowledge to these families so they can diversify their diets, improve nutrition and better manage scarce resources to improve the quality of their lives," said Viviana Muñoz, an América Solidaria volunteer psychologist.

Firstly, the community is divided into sectors, each with its own elected representative and community garden plot. And América Solidaria staff undertake a psychosocial diagnostic phase to determine family need, education and literacy levels and to build trust and familiarity.

Families work alongside project staff and volunteers, clearing land for their community and personal gardens, building fences and compost areas, establishing community garden beds. All the while new farming techniques are taught and put into practice.

Seedbeds are established, herbal medicine seeds are planted vertically in recycled PET bottles and new seeds are distributed and nurtured to seedling stage in nurseries, then distributed to families by sector. Rainwater tanks are also installed.

NGO partners have found that when families are fully involved in the garden creation process, not only do they develop more confidence and a feeling of pride in their work and achievements, they also better retain the new farming techniques and are therefore more likely to apply them in their own family gardens.

Augustín and Valentina Pérez Tzrax, and their eight children, continue to reap the benefits of the Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios 2013 pilot project. Augustín, who supports his family in season as a day labourer and farmhand on cardamom and coffee plantations, now principally feeds his family from subsistence farming. →

top Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios supports families to improve nutrition levels and quality of life through the establishment of diverse food gardens, nutrition knowledge and better management of scarce resources. **bottom** Project staff and volunteers become part of these communities for up to a year, sharing meals and daily life, building and growing, together.

The family diet consists almost exclusively of what they grow themselves, mostly corn with some beans, pumpkin, potatoes, herbs and eggs from their chickens, plus a very few store-bought staples like oatmeal, sugar and coffee. “We never buy vegetables in the market now,” says Augustín.

Throughout the project, families participate in many theoretical and practical workshops, which cover nutrition, food hygiene, cooking, understanding vegetable varieties and their nutrient values, as well as a range of organic farming techniques and theories.

Social activities are a key part of the program, for building confidence and strengthening communal and familial ties; the future sustainability of Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios hinges on these ties, along with the application of new skills, once NGO staff have moved on. But while they are there – instructing, building and growing together – project staff and volunteers become part of these communities, sharing meals and daily life.

When the project began, Augustín was selected to represent the families in sector #3. He sectioned off a large tract of land, normally used for growing corn, for the new family garden. One third of the land is used for his sector’s nursery where the fifteen families in his sector put into good practice techniques learned in the community garden. These include terracing with proper drainage, composting, worm and water harvesting, making homemade organic fertiliser and growing seedlings in plastic bottles. Augustín says that these farming techniques are “different” and “really nice” and believes there is potential to earn extra income from selling produce at the market. But he is clear about the highest priority: “What is most important is good food for my children and having [these vegetables] for our own consumption.”

The transmission of contemporary agricultural techniques and nutritional knowledge has led to significant improvements in the lives of 142 Macalajau and Canaque families, with respect to nutrition, general health and potential earning power. Huertos Familiares y Comunitarios is also a powerful reminder of what can be achieved with the scarcest of resources paired with a collaborative, community spirit. 🌱

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