

Stories of Hope and Resistance from Chile: EPES' Community Action During the COVID Pandemic

In the midst of the suffering and uncertainty ravaging our world since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Christians we are called to be co-creators of a more just future. As Mauricio López Oropeza, executive secretary of the Pan-Amazon Church Network says in a recent essay, *"We are called to make ourselves aware that our actions will be part of the journey to overcome this crisis in a communitarian way, and with an unavoidable option for the most vulnerable and excluded of our societies in the time of this pandemic and beyond it."** This series, **Stories of Hope and Resistance from Chile**, present accounts of concrete ways EPES is working to address the crisis as it affects the communities, families and people we love and work with in Chile.

– Karen Anderson, ELCA Global Mission Personnel in Chile and Director of EPES' International Training Program

The COVID-19 public health crisis has revealed the profound inequalities that exist in Chile, especially within the capital city of Santiago. The pandemic has worsened the already harsh living and working conditions for many, especially for the thousands of families and communities that live on day wages. As the lockdown has forced many people to stay home without means to put food on the table at the end of the day, in recent weeks, people in low-income communities have taken to the streets protesting hunger and the dire conditions their families and communities face during the pandemic.

CULTIVATING LOCAL VEGETABLE GARDENS AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Inequalities in access to good quality and nutritious food, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, have become ever more visible. In times of the pandemic and the strict lockdown that keeps people from leaving their homes, cultivating one's own vegetables is an act of resistance that grants greater autonomy and assures families access to fresh and good-quality foods. Home and community vegetable gardens also are symbols of creating alternative local food systems that foster food justice and strengthen the community's active role in local food production.

EPES' ONLINE WORKSHOP: A SPACE FOR MY OWN VEGETABLE GARDEN

Against this background, with the support of ELCA's Global Mission, EPES organized an online workshop, *A Space For My Own Vegetable Garden*, aimed to provide a collective learning space as a means to facilitate the process of cultivating home vegetable gardens. Twenty health promoters participated in the online workshop, which consisted of three 1.5 hour sessions that were transmitted live via YouTube so that the promoters could connect from their homes. (While not all low-income Chileans have computers at home, almost every household has someone with a smart phone that allows the health promoters to connect online).

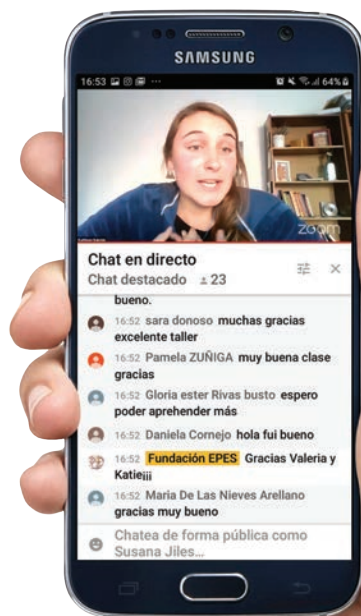
Despite the fact that green areas are considered vital to people's wellbeing, they are scarce in health promoters' neighborhoods, and the gardening space around their



Protestors in Chile display signs that read "Tenemos Hambre (We are hungry)."

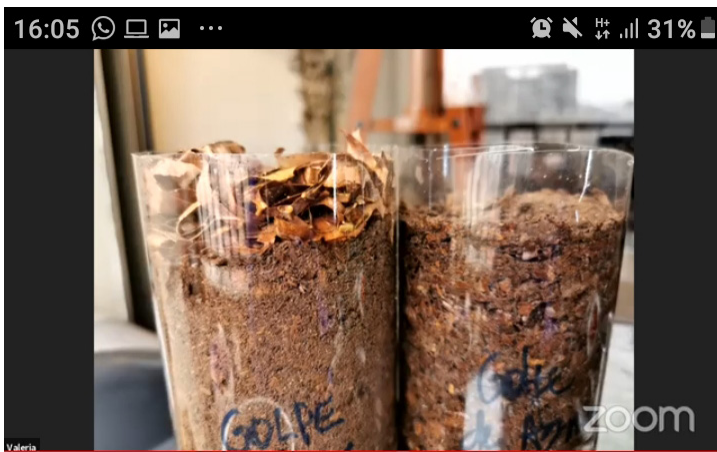
houses is quite limited. In this light, the challenge to grow one's own vegetables takes on far greater significance.

In the first session, the health promoters learned about how to improve their soil using compost, in addition to participating in a hands-on experiment of playing with the soil to see how it feels and what type of soil each one had at home. For some, this was the first time since childhood that they put their hands in the dirt and connected with the earth. Yoyita, a health promoter for over 25 years, later said, "I never really liked to garden or work with dirt, but now after playing with the soil, I want to have my own vegetable garden. The idea of gardening as a means of producing food rather than just decoration always seemed out of reach, but now I'm going to do it myself."



EPES staff member conducts an online workshop while participants start home gardens by first playing with soil.

*López Oropeza M. National. Commentary in Catholic Reporter Feature Series: Coronavirus, 7 Apr 2020. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/apocalyptic-hope-essential-living-heart-pandemic>



Composting is explained online and demonstrated using recycled plastic bottles. It can be not only a way to create nourishing soil to grow vegetables, but a means to reutilize food scraps.

The women were asked to observe the space in their homes to see where they would like to create their own vegetable gardens. They received tips about what plants would be best to grow given the amount of space and natural light their gardens receive during the day. They also discussed tips for planting seeds, preparing the soil, watering and using recyclable containers as pots to plant different types of vegetables. For many who live in reduced spaces and don't have access to soil to plant a vegetable garden, the idea of being able to grow lettuce, chives, spinach and tomatoes in recycled bottles and crates was very inspiring.

Composting was also a very interesting topic among the promoters as a means to create their own soil, as well as a means to reutilize food scraps. "I have reduced the amount of trash we generate by composting organic waste," observed Pamela Zúñiga, nutrition promoter.

The vegetable garden online workshop concluded with an evaluation session, in which the promoters discussed next steps that they would like to do collectively to promote the creation and use of vegetable gardens in their communities. The health group "David Werner" has decided that their next group project after the lockdown lifts will be to create a communal vegetable garden in their local community center, which is currently being used as a soup kitchen. They plan to set up a compost pile in



The next step when the lockdown is lifted will be to create a community garden at one of the local community centers. They will use composting to recycle food scraps from a soup kitchen currently being run at the center, and eventually be able to have fresh produce for the soup kitchen.

order to recycle the food scraps from the soup kitchen and have good, nourishing soil in a few months to start their vegetable garden.

ONGOING ACCOMPANIMENT AND SEEDLING AND SOIL DONATIONS TO START GARDENS

EPES continues to accompany this process through technical assistance and coordination, as well as providing each of the health promoters with seedlings to plant a variety of vegetables in their own homes. EPES has also established new networks with the local government to collaboratively strengthen the process of home vegetable gardens through soil donations to the health promoters so they can begin cultivating their own food at home.

The health promoters were greatly enthused with the workshop and motivated to have their own vegetable gardens as a means to create food solidarity networks.

CO-CREATORS

For the health promoters, the workshop was not only a space to connect with one another and continue to learn about how they could grow their own vegetables at home, it also planted a seed that germinated the formation of new networks and solidarity among the women, as well as collaborations with other groups within their communities.

In accepting the novel challenge to grow their own vegetables, each health promoter took a small but significant step to transform the quality of life of their families and neighbors, as co-creators of a more vibrant and healthier community.

"Mapuche communities produce what they need and exchange among themselves. It would be beautiful if we could do the same here," affirmed Maggie, a health promoter from Circle of Women for Health.

Thank you to Katie Bubriski member of the EPES' Food, Justice, Gender and Health team for writing and Maxine Lowy and Chris Mills for their edits and additions.



EPES was created in 1982 to promote health with dignity for the poor through empowerment, mobilization and collective action. It began as a program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) and maintains close ties nationally and internationally with the Lutheran church and is an ELCA Global Mission supported ministry. EPES became an independent, non-profit Chilean foundation in 2002.

