



MUCH MORE THAN VEGETABLE GARDENERS

On November 18, 35 people graduated from the Popular Education Agroecology School organized by EPES and the El Bosque Inter-Sector Community Nutrition Board. With diplomas in hand, these new agroecologists become community gardeners who make a difference.

Course coordinator and EPES staff Susana Jiles noted, “The school centered on collective participation, with the knowledge that everyone already possessed. We used techniques that strengthen collective analysis such as group work, promotion of social integration, building collective know-how, techniques and tools needed for community garden work. We generated this space for collective reflection; the neighbors of El Bosque brought all the rest.”

On the first Saturday session in September, people brought soil samples from their houses, and facilitators Rosa Herrera and Barbara Salas taught them how to identify types of soil, how to care for the earth, and how to plant seeds.

In later sessions they learned about composting, garden design and natural pest control, and also about how climate change affects our food production system and the concepts of food sovereignty. Congressperson Daniel Melo praised EPES “for the role it has played in bringing together different people and entities around this issue.” Melo added, “Thank you all for the energy you have given to build a different municipality and a better country. Climate change is a global phenomenon with very local manifestations and in Chile we are quite susceptible as a country. Everything you do contributes to greater sustainability.”



With the aroma of copal incense filling the air, under the shade of a fig tree, the Pachamama—the mother earth—was thanked for her generous bounty, in the millennial Aymaran tradition. Each group of agroecologists presented their own offerings of gratitude: seeds, flowers, ceramic vessels, a miniature water mill.

Speaking for one of the gardening groups at the closing ceremony, Alex Medina, noted, “At first, I was just interested in learning how to grow vegetables. But, little by little, we realized that first we had to learn what was at stake and we have to respect the soil’s natural cycles. Thank you, dear instructors, for teaching us that the real pests don’t have six or eight legs but are tall two-legged bugs who think they are smart. We must not let the seed sowed in us die. We have to keep nourishing the right to live in peace.”

And he added, “As Victor Jara sang, ‘Butterflies fly, grasshoppers sing, my skin turns black, and the sun shines and shines.’ Today we rarely see butterflies, and we don’t hear grasshoppers. Let’s not be silent accomplices to the planet’s destruction. Let’s plant without harming the earth. May everyone have a good harvest.”

COMMUNITY GARDENING: THE TASTE OF HAPPINESS

Under the shadow of scorched ruins, verdant life is springing forth. The loving care and dedication of EPES health promoters have transformed a site of tragedy into a place where solidarity, compassion and generosity are cultivated with every vegetable they sow, nurture and harvest.

In September 2019, a fire broke out behind a community center in El Bosque killing Emerson, the caretaker's seven-year-old son. The shell of the building, still unrepaired, is a stark reminder of the abandonment of low-income peripheral sectors. However, on a strip of yard beside the building, chard, peas, carrots, celery, lettuce, parsley, eggplants, are sprouting from raised beds attached to metal structures built from tables rescued from the fire. It is the work of the Amajudisa Community Gardeners' Group. They started 8 months ago with donations of 20 bags of composted dirt from the municipal government, seeds from EPES, and know-how from a series of workshops.

Dixa Contreras and Anita Navarro are experienced health promoters, trained in 1984 during the dictatorship. "When we stayed inside our houses, EPES helped us to take courage and get out," says Anita. Today they coordinate twelve gardeners and encourage neighborhood women to venture beyond their homes to enrich their lives.

Explained Anita Navarro, "It is such a great sensation to put your hands in the soil. And to harvest what we ourselves planted is wonderful. It's like raising a baby. You feel such satisfaction when it grows up."



How does a tossed salad taste when it's made from vegetables you have grown? "It tastes like happiness!" Anita and Dixa exclaim in unison.



Anita points out another way the project benefits neighbors: "This has changed the lives of many women. They have become more independent. It has opened new doors for them." Adds Dixa, "What we are doing here is health for the soul."



▲ The garden group works in the raised beds they built along the side of the burnt-out building of the El Bosque community center.



▲ After two years of training with EPES Concepción, the Nutrition Health Promoters and EPES organized the first Trafkintü (an exchange in the Mapuche language Mapuzungún). The exchange was of flavors, knowledge and actions related to work in community gardens and health. Health promoters from Hualpén and organizations from the province of Arauco actively participated.



LEARNING SPANISH OPENS NEW DOORS FOR HAITIAN WOMEN

Eighteen Haitian women proudly received diplomas from the hands of their children when graduating from EPES' first Spanish course on October 20. These women had previously depended upon their children to communicate in everyday situations. This changed in July, when EPES opened its Learning Together Introductory Spanish language course, organized with the El Bosque Municipal immigrant office, and funded by a government grant for public interest organizations.

EPES initiated its migrant advocacy in the field of public health rights in 2019. Since then, it has observed that the language barrier Haitian women face makes them more vulnerable than other immigrant groups in Chile.

A special feature of this course was that the students were exclusively Haitian women. Course coordinator and EPES staff María Stella Tora explains why, "Haitian women tend to speak less Spanish than their male counterparts, mainly because they bear a greater part of the burden for household and childcare responsibilities. This limits their contact outside the home, where immigrants pick up Spanish." Participants' average age was 30 and the

majority had been in Chile for less than 5 years. Most had come to Chile with children and husbands, or reunited with them here.



EPES volunteers provided childcare to facilitate participation. While the children had breakfast and played games, their mothers were having fun in their own classroom, with the teaching method derived from popular education learn-by-playing concepts. At the start of one session, the teacher Maria Elena Soto and intercultural facilitator Michèle Joseph asked the women to form a circle. "Simon says smile," said the teacher. A big smile lit up the faces of most of the women. They clearly knew what "sonrisa" (smile) means. "Simon says "párense" (stand up); now sit down."

Amid laughter and confusion, the women followed Simon's orders. Not only were they expanding their Spanish vocabulary. In that safe, comfortable space, they socialized and created bonds of mutual support, important for strengthening their self-esteem and autonomy, and for integrating better in Chilean society.

Upon graduation, they had acquired basic Spanish skills to more fully engage in Chilean society. EPES is currently exploring possibilities for a second-level course to enable greater command of the language.



▲ Haitian Spanish course graduates, their children and EPES staff.



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.

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▲ On Sunday November 5th, members of Action for Health in the Americas AHA-NYC, held a house party fundraiser for EPES. Song keeper, earth activist, and long-term friend and supporter of EPES, Bethany Yarrow, and her father, Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul and Mary, led the singing and storytelling about themes of justice, the role of music in building social movements, and the work of EPES. About forty friends gathered to celebrate and support EPES' work building healthy communities in Chile and around the world. Everyone left feeling more resilient to deal with these difficult times and buoyed for future work.



▲ The EPES Concepción team traveled three hours from Concepción to Pitrufquén (in the Araucanía region) to participate in a Health Day organized by the local Community Family Health Center, to share experiences in health education using a popular education approach. In the photo, patients of the Community Health Center are playing EPES' educational game From the Seed to the Plate, which generated a space to reflect and discuss food in a horizontal, creative and playful way.