Mapping seeds of freedom with Red de Huerteros Medellín

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While large populations need considerable amounts of food, modern cities have tended to reject local agriculture. Instead, they favour capitalist priorities that influence many other political and economic processes, accelerating both urbanisation and large-scale agriculture to an unhealthy and even dangerous level. However, potential alliances between agriculture and cities are developing which may also boost struggles that seek to resist the negative consequences of industrial-scale agriculture and reverse its damage. Urban collectives are one such alliance, fighting to transform spatial conditions by taking advantage of the transformative power of urban agriculture.

Like in many other cities (Lundberg, 2013), urban collectives and local governments in Medellín, Colombia, have started to use urban agriculture as a transformative tool. For example, local administrations might provide tools and supplies, training, as well as support to overcome difficulties in implementing urban agriculture. Many people who engage in urban food growing and urban food system activities come from economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Understanding this, local administrations try to demonstrate that urban agriculture can be part of a strategy to alleviate hunger and, at the same time, stop unplanned urban sprawl beyond the city's boundaries. These actions are supported by numerous research papers that regard urban agriculture as a way to address hunger and environmental issues in cities (Méndez-Lemus and Vieyra, 2017; Degenhart, 2016).

People who live in peri-urban areas often have both the initiative and space to plant crops. They may also possess agricultural knowledge from having previously lived in rural areas. Sometimes, their labour on peri-urban farms is profitable. Local governments typically intervene once such urban agriculture projects become successful, in order to demonstrate how urban agriculture works as a way of economic transformation and of improving families' diets (Corcoran and Kettle, 2015). In this way, urban agriculture becomes a tool for local governments to convey that they have achieved their goals and that communities' needs have been satisfied while investing in few resources.

Red de Huerteros Medellín

Medellín is a city with little space and whose soil and air are highly polluted. Although urban agriculture has enormous potential to transform socio-economic realities, in Medellín, that potential stems from the fact that urban farms work as social laboratories allowing citizens to become empowered political subjects that understand their role in the supply segment of the food chain and, as a result, manage to transform their subjectivities (Rivera y Calero, 2022). However, there are also other ways to view urban agriculture in Medellín which enable us to regard farms as *tools* used by families, neighbourhood groups, social organisations and institutions for ecopolitical goals and not only as "devices" for food production. We argue that it is this combination of ecology, economics and

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Fig. 1: In 2014, members of the *Red de Huerteros Medellín* (RHM) network create Medellín's food map

food production that provides urban agriculture's most significant transforming power.

In 2013, Medellín witnessed the creation of a collective called *Red de Huerteros Medellín* (RHM). From its inception, this group has questioned the origin of agricultural products that feed cities, reflected on local practices to produce them, supported those practices that maintain biodiversity and health and created alliances with other food-focused collectives to support the establishment of vibrant cities and towns.

RHM's manifesto, *Sowing Sovereign and Solidary Worlds* (2017), supports food sovereignty, building on a concept coined by Vía Campesina that differs from food security as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (Medina *et al.*, 2021). While the latter only considers food availability, the former also takes into account the mode of production, the food's origin and peoples' autonomy regarding food policies. RHM's manifesto, therefore, regards urban agriculture as an eco-political practice. It acknowledges how people make decisions that contribute to maintaining or putting in question certain powers while planting, buying, cooking or waste recycling. These powers are usually encompassed within free trade agreements, intellectual property protection rules and similar agreements among countries intended to give rise to life-based innovation and its appropriation by private hands. It is important to remember that Colombia has been a country at war for a long time, engulfed in a conflict caused by the unequal distribution of all kinds of resources: from land to education, from access to food to access to energy sources or drinking water. After the signing of the *Peace Agreement* with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) in 2016, citizens started to demonstrate in a more fervent way their unwillingness to accept political and police violence, inequalities and injustice. The RHM manifesto bears witness to that.

Mapping bottom-up

One of RHM's most important actions was the collective mapping of Medellín's urban farms in 2014. On a paper map made using only paper, scissors, pencils and glue, they located their farms geographically, accompanied by icons to record characteristics such as name, address, area, participants, activities and goals (fig. 1). The maps produced made visible how the network's urban farms were not isolated but were instead part of a practice that was well

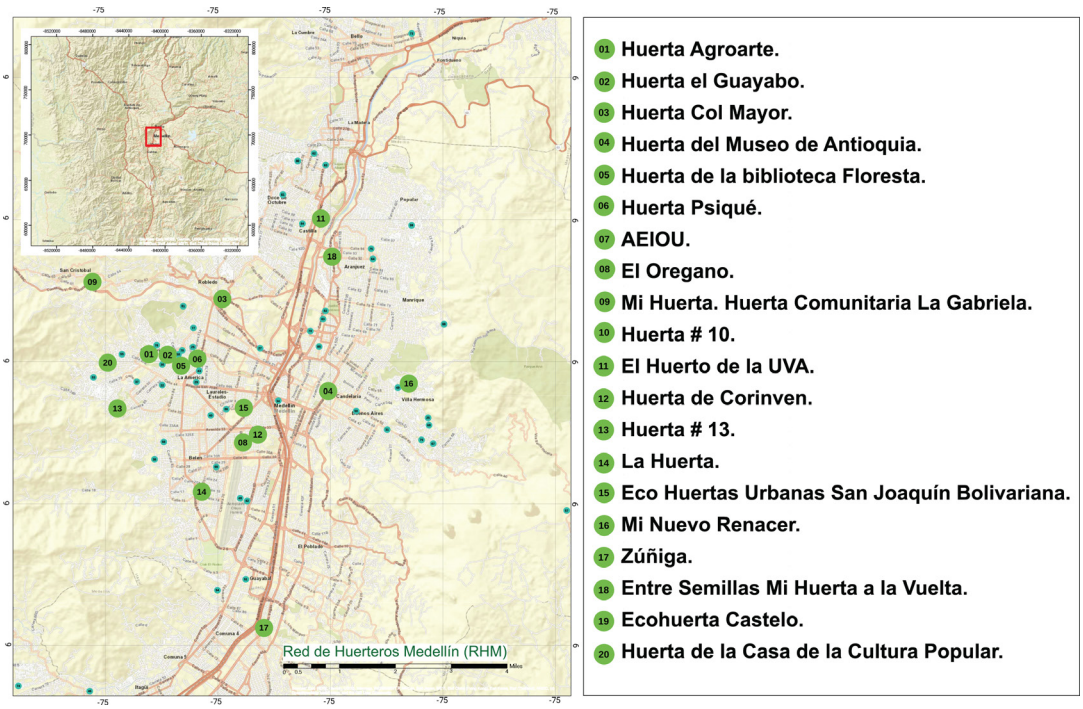


Fig. 2: Community-generated map showing the general distribution of urban farms across Medellín (RHM, 2020b)

established in the city. This spatial visualisation enabled RHM to identify as a group of people who contributed to a larger movement. Seen in isolation, the farms mainly functioned with production objectives; seen collectively, they became understood as a network of communicative interactions that can give rise to collective ways of inhabiting and contesting space in confrontation with neoliberal logic.

Later, RHM opened a Facebook group and were able to establish contacts with more urban farmers and ask for geo-referenced data to build new maps. Due to concerns about data privacy, RHM decided to create a map in Open Street Map (OSM) which enabled the urban farmers to participate in the map's edit using this free and open-source tool. This new platform gave RHM and its further network more autonomy and ensured that geo-referenced data would be available for everyone. The map was continually updated and reached around 70 entries.

In 2017, RHM decided to study Medellín's urban agriculture characteristics and this has greatly progressed our knowledge of the city's urban agriculture practices. On the one hand, it has allowed us to understand that seed saving is little understood or practised in urban agriculture and this has motivated us to explore further the world of biotechnological and legal details. On the other hand, it has led us to see urban agriculture in our city not as a single activity but as multiple and interconnected practices that should be evaluated one by one. Not being able to articulate the multiple different practices that constitute urban agriculture as a whole has placed us at a disadvantage. Yet, every single practice is vitally important, for example, when exploring seed-saving practices.

The data we used for our research were taken from the OSM map. Unfortunately, several farms no longer existed and some urban

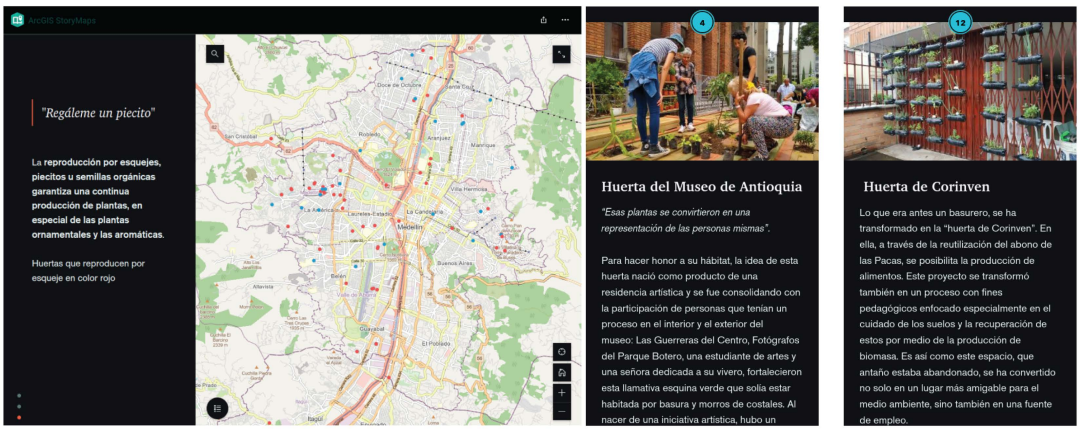


Fig. 3: Screenshots of the online Story Map showing a map of farms that use cutting propagation techniques for plant reproduction and two stories about urban farms (RHM, 2020d)

farmers did not answer our written request for an interview or did not respond when we called them. Nevertheless, the previous 70 entries provided a good starting point to collect stories about urban agriculture in the city and this mapping catalysed our identity as a movement.

From those records, using the snowball technique, we interviewed a further 84 urban farmers. Each farmer answered a questionnaire that included qualitative, quantitative, relational and geo-referenced information which we then mapped. The resulting maps represent an essential feature of our research. One example is our regularly updated overview map (fig. 2), showing the general distribution of farms across Medellín. Another example is the online *Story Map* which can be found at *https://arcg.is/0nLPDK* (fig. 3). It includes location data; short geo-referenced stories about the farms' origins; pictures; classification by gender; an iconographic distinction among private, family and community farms; compost production; cultivated plants; and plant husbandry.

We highlighted the organic waste management map, which expressed how this is a strong urban agriculture practice. However, one of the most insightful maps was not a geographically based map but a relationship one (fig. 4). This relational map shows links between farms, people and organisations related to urban agriculture. It demonstrated urban agriculture as an activity constituted by diverse practices: waste management, bees and other insect preservation, seed liberation, knowledge about medicinal plants, ancestral recipe conservation, among others. These maps highlight practices of utmost importance such as seed use and safeguarding due to their global socio-political power and how they relate to other aspects of urban agriculture.

This relational map visualised a poor connection or no connection at all among urban farmers (UFs) and key organisations related to seed guardians (SGs) (fig. 4): people who protect seeds with the intention of benefiting humanity instead of them becoming private property of multinational corporations. This map supports other data outcomes: only a few Ufs actually know about the eco-political implications of the seed business and even fewer obtain their seeds from seed keepers or show any consideration for their labour. Hence the research revealed that Ufs have little knowledge about political, economic and epistemic implications related to seeds that give rise to our food, nor do they support SGs' labour.

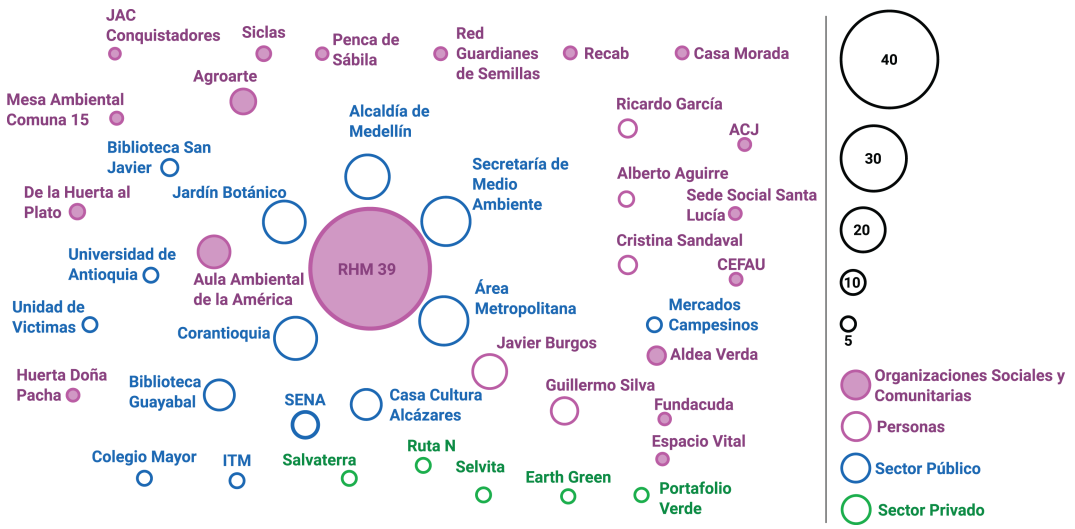


Fig. 4: This relational map shows the key links between farms, people and organisations related to urban agriculture (RHM, 2020c)

Furthermore, this map illustrates connections between UFs, organisations and stakeholders. The size of the circles shows the number of relationships with an organisation or person. RHM was the most highly related organisation: an outcome which was expected since most farmers interviewed were contacted due to their connections with this organisation through maps and geo-referenced data. Alternatively, the organisations Red de Guardianes de Semillas and Red Colombiana de Agricultura Biológica (RECAB) were two of the least related organisations, with less than five relationships among the interviewed UFs and no relation at all with individual SGs.

The most common origin of seeds were the farms themselves, who collect and store seeds from each harvest. Although most of the time this is a good practice, it is mainly carried out in response to an inability to finance buying seeds in stores. Only 29% of gardeners get their seeds from SGs and this quote illustrates motivations for using this source:

We support seed guardians because of our love of Earth and farmers. Because of our love for life, because of respect, because of the aim to preserve and value a legacy. There is a family memoir, a preservation story of aliment and the natural rhythm of life.

(D46_LaHuertaDeGedy)

Politics versus agriculture

In 2019, a national strike declared discontent with the Colombian government and its politics. This situation was echoed in the Facebook group when administrators accepted a post that said: "*For the defense of life, I march #21N (21th November 2019)*". For some members, it was against the group's objectives, supposedly only intended to address urban farming. The aforementioned members wrote comments such as the following: "*Political posts should be eliminated. Agriculture has nothing to do with the left or right: Everyone decides who they vote for. I would ask members to respect this*".

Despite this disagreement, group administrators were not swayed. According to them, urban agriculture is meant to reflect on conflicts arising within agriculture, how cities have contributed to their worsening and how cities themselves can help to solve

them. For example, in Colombia, there is an endless debate about the private property of seeds, use of soils, excessive consumption, agrotoxic usage, glyphosate usage to eradicate coca plantations and water usage in fracking (which, moreover, the government has backed all along). The pledge of many movements that work with urban agriculture worldwide was to understand food choice as a political act. Thereby, this practice becomes a way of asking for our *right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1967) to the extent that resistance is formed in response to the capitalist dynamics that have permeated the act of eating and living in the city.

The *Story Map* has allowed us to strengthen this eco-political narrative surrounding urban agriculture. For example, there is a section dedicated to the farm narratives of Medellín, where we record experiences and stories told by UFs. In the first map (see *https://arcg.is/0nLPDK)*, for example, we read:

"*Agroarte was born as a form of resistance against La Escombrera, a place located in Comuna 13, where more than 300 bodies disappeared after Operación Orión (a military operation that took place on October 16 and 17, 2002*)". Other maps in the same section tell diverse stories about urban agriculture in Medellín. For example, Colectivo Tierra states: "*This is a clear example of how a space that was previously at the center of crime and the accumulation of rubbish can be the origin of a project of territorial and social transformation*". Huerta los Valores' story is also awe-inspiring, where a group of ex-guerrilla combatants originally founded this garden in 2004. Other stories are about women trying to survive and teachers teaching through gardens or collectives occupying space. Hence, our stories have to do with social struggles, regarding ecology as a political struggle and the idea that the urban agriculture can be a tool to fight for our *right to the city* from cultural, ethnic and gender diversity (Soja, 2018).

Although there are many ways of doing urban agriculture, we are focused on those that set a scenario for important actors to transform the city into a territory of resistance to defend life. For example, some Ufs interviewed had sustainable practices and discourses related to water use in the city, urban biodiversity and urban soil regeneration, while also questioning consumption. Harvey (2012) comes to the conclusion that capitalism thrives within the city and, at the same time, transforms it into a place of inequality. Therefore, capitalism needs to invest its surplus through urbanisation, generating more surplus to be invested in the town in order for capital concentration and towns to develop at the same time and at the same rate. Both Lefebvre (1968) and Harvey (2012) maintained that a political consciousness to fight against this kind of urbanisation and production should emerge. However, they differ on who those protagonists would be. Might these protagonists also be UFs, as many people claim?

Urban agriculture is probably overrated as a tool used to seek social justice. Some local governments regard it simply as a cure for misery and a way for low-income families to guarantee food security. Projects that promote this kind of urban agriculture do not question production modes that feed cities through industrial agriculture. We at RHM assert that urban agriculture calls and works for the *right to the city* and should question capitalist methods related to food production which are mainly intended to feed urban inhabitants. Perhaps the practice that best represents this is the safeguarding of the freedom of seeds.

The politics of seeds in Colombia

RHM seeks to put seeds at the core of the urban agriculture debate in resistance to the disastrous consequences of capitalism. According to Luby and Goldman (2016), in the last 100 years, restrictions to germplasm have been increasing so much that the vision of plants as public property has eroded. Moreover, the issue of seeds has become such a sensitive topic that in many countries its administration outwith

certain rules imposed by corporations such as Dupont, Syngenta and Bayer-Monsanto can be illegal. Keeping seeds is vital to guarantee production and adapt new generations of plants through artificial selection and other practices that have guaranteed agricultural and food security for centuries. Unfortunately, biotechnology and political lobbying are being used to take advantage of this and restrict their circulation, endangering ancient farming practices. As Vandana Shiva (2007) highlighted, seeds are symbols of freedom amid manipulation and monopoly. Biotechnology is used to manipulate and patents to monopolise them.

Transgenic seed companies lobby the political powers of countries to modify patent laws of living organisms such as seeds and plants so that these corporations build economic, political and juridic environments, thus, monopolising markets. Luby and Goldman argue that such actions by corporations that limit the rights of farmers to keep seeds threaten plant breeding innovation. When seeds are patented by corporations, they patent such innovations capturing humankind's heritage as "raw material". As such, seeds and the accumulated public knowledge surrounding them, being classified as private property, is ethically complex (Shiva, 2007). There is little labour directed towards seed protection in cities. Prioritising this task, however, would bring about many advantages, including empowering citizens with knowledge and the consciousness to support the defence of free, creole and native seeds, in addition to adapting seeds to urban environments.

However, RHM has not yet been able to work extensively enough in order to safeguard the freedom of seeds. One action was the construction of a seed directory where distributors of grains, cereals and nuts of native and creole seeds can be found (RHM, 2020a). We also created a study group to learn about other SGs' networks around the world, legal and educational activities that fight against seed privatisation, Colombian legislation regarding this topic and the relationship between food and seed privatisation. We are currently working on two interventions and dialogues regarding such knowledge. One of them is called Flavors and Knowledge that brings together knowledge about creole and native seeds to make visible the link between seeds and foods that feed the city. We have also conducted gastronomic workshops to learn how to cook different ancestral seeds such as pigeon peas, chachafruto, cassava, arracacha and petaco beans. We have also used social media by making TikTok videos and developing an Instagram channel @ redhuerteros.

However, our contact with organisations related to the seeds' custody had been largely intermittent. The rights to seeds in Colombia is currently under discussion in the House of Representatives. The draft *Legislative Act number 226* of 2019 proposes to: "*prohibit the entry into the country, as well as the production, commercialization, export and release of genetically modified seeds, to protect the environment and guarantee the right of rural inhabitants and farmers to free seeds*" (2019). However, this current legislation has created some confusion. While this uncertainty has enabled some SGs to continue working with few difficulties, we are also concerned that mapping SGs may create potential repressive actions, as has emerged from historical cases of expropriation of hundreds of tons of seeds that were considered illegal by the Instituto Colombiano de Agricultura (Colombian Institute of Agriculture).

From these actions, RHM is improving relationships between Ufs and SGs, between the countryside and the city, transforming practices and knowledge about seeds by Ufs in Medellín towards a more eco-political perspective. A map is a powerful tool to further encourage consumption of these products and strengthen links between UFs and SGs. However, we have refrained from doing so for fear of facilitating retaliation against seed guardians. Although many cities and countries have forbidden GMOs in agriculture, there is yet a long way to go to build fairer agricultural standards.

Organic waste management

While seeds as a political topic were underdeveloped in Medellín's urban agriculture, waste management was received more favourably, giving rise to a Medellín-led organic waste movement. The city deployed *Paca Digestora Silva* (PDS), a device to manage organic waste by compacting leaves and kitchen waste layers. Our research showed that 83% of interviewed farmers make their own fertiliser, 67% use the compost method, 40% use PDS and 37% use vermicompost. Ufs also engage in complex discourses about soils, waste reuse and consumption decrease – aspects that relate to waste management.

This organic waste management discourse has spread throughout Colombia and other countries, where for example, Bogota has become the leader of the so-called *Movimiento Paquero*. Although the PDS produces organic fertiliser for farms and gardens, the movement also focused on reflecting on consumption practices and the collapse of landfill systems. In figure 4, we see considerably more relationships with people and organisations related to waste management than with those related to seed keeping. However, some organisations – such as Medellín's Botanical Garden – work across these issues. Although seeds and waste management seem disparate, both have had significant repercussions in the city where they represent key sites of connection between global problems and urban gardens. For example, they link the fight against an aggressive consumption system that generates enormous amounts of garbage, seeks to increase private profits and expropriates knowledge resulting from thousands of years of work. However, the countryside seems to be a more suitable place than the city to resolve these issues, especially for SG's networks that tend to address efforts by rural farmers and indigenous peoples.

According to our research, both practices and discourses, such as consumption, food sovereignty or environmental crisis, are strong in waste management. Alternatively, some UFs keep seeds from their harvests, few are related to SGs and even fewer articulate actions related to topics such as food sovereignty or autonomy, civilisational crisis or economic model crisis. The RHM has been very interested in mapping waste management, especially in places that are using the PDS as shown in http://u.osmfr.org/m/392408/ where can be found pacas in Medellín, Colombia and the world. Bogotá has also extensively promoted community waste management using PDS, mapping their distribution by nodes (*https://linktr.ee/PacaDigestoraSilva*) (fig. 5).

Spatial struggles

Lefebvre (1968) coined the concept of the *right to the city* arguing that cities are unfair and unequal places and that cities' inhabitants were the ones called to fight against such a situation. This fight is against capitalist urbanisation and the mode of production to which it contributes. RHM recognised that the city has the power to bring people together. The city as a singular space can transform society through "spatial struggles" which can be potentialised and eased by using maps from social movements. In the 1990s, Lefebvre's concept was re-launched by the so-called *spatial spin* and gained a new force in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century (Molano, 2015). Current struggles for urban space confront the degradation of cities led by financial capitalism, such is visible in services and soil privatisation, raising inequality, erosion of urban democracy, gentrification and environmental deterioration.

Looking at the role of urban agriculture in the contemporary spatial struggles of Medellín, there are a few key imaginable scenarios: in RHM's different mappings we have learned that urban agriculture can be understood as food system activities of small collectives that aim to find ways to articulate their actions through communication networks. These scenarios are full of contradictions. They seek to fight for collective ways of inhabiting space and, at the same time, are complicit to forms of cultivation

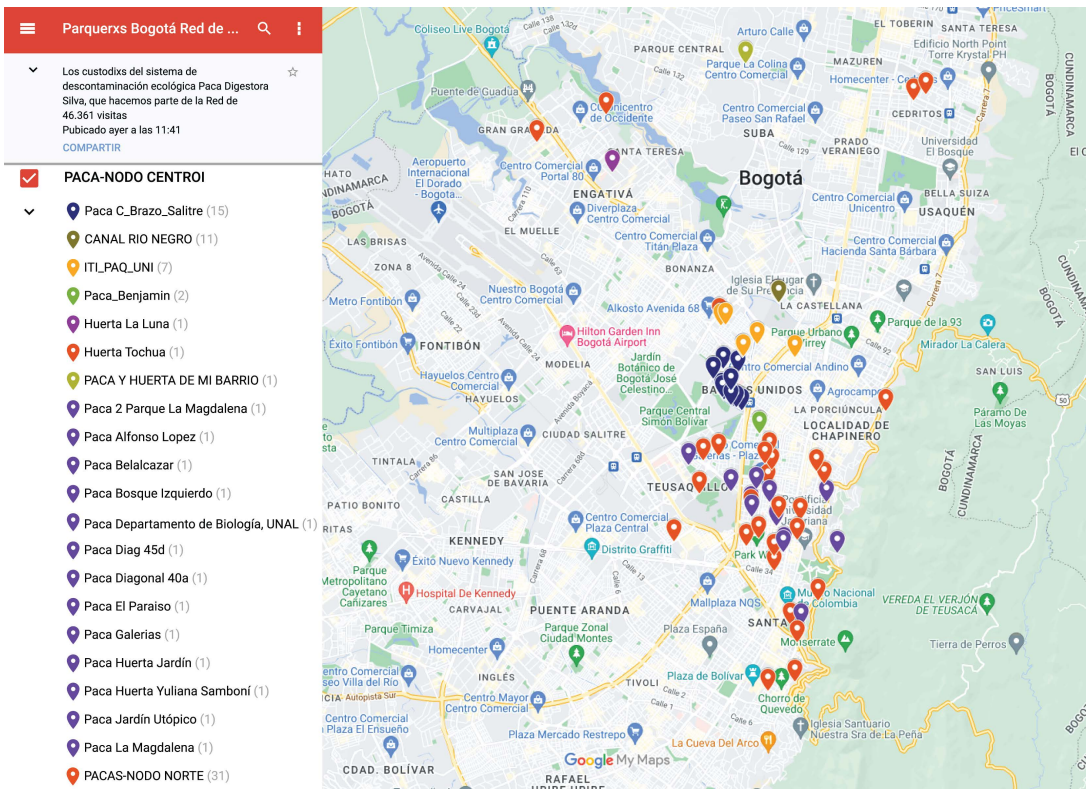


Fig. 5: PDS registered in Bogotá Región, mapped by nodes (Red de huerteras y huerteros de Bakatá Región, n.d.)

that strengthen neoliberal logics which, in turn, can lead to the endangerment of food sovereignty and a lack of understanding in the articulation between political ecology discourses and planting practices.

When space is at the core of the debate, mapping is an urgent practice that allows us to look at the city in other ways and to appropriate it from the bottom up. These struggles are limited not only to opposing neoliberalism, but also appeal to resisting cultural, ethnic and gender injustices (Soja, 2018). Even though urban agriculture can give rise to urban communication models that enable us to inhabit space and gain our *right to the city*, it is also required to strengthen certain agricultural discourses and practices in the town that lead us to a food production closer to life. We consider that it is essential to enhance communication practices that allow UFs to appropriate the discourses related to safeguarding seeds and caring for pollinators, responsible consumption and proper organic waste management. As Lefebvre argued regarding politicising space in the city, it is also necessary to politicise urban agriculture. As such, joint efforts must be made to understand and transform the relationship that agriculture has with global eco-politics to ensure that urban agriculture represents a site of resistance towards securing our *right to the city*.

Mapping urban agriculture as a social movement

This chapter has demonstrated how the RHM has used maps to identify as a social movement, to transform the narratives related to urban agriculture, to give visibility to the PDS and to

find and connect people who are carrying out urban agriculture activities. Urban agriculture mapping has made us aware of being a collective body and, in doing so, has strengthened our work. In other words, maps have strengthened our fight for our *right to the city*. One significant difference between the work we have done around seeds and the PDS is that the latter was extensively mapped. Although its success is not limited to this act, there is no doubt that it has contributed, especially in Bogotá, to spreading this practice across the country within just a few years. The absence of a map for seeds, however, needs to be understood as a reflection of fear in the face of advancing repressive legislation, especially witnessed in the United States, the country that many Latin American governments tend to imitate. After all, maps are tools for generating and communicating knowledge – primarily related to space and social connections – and for articulating ideas and people. They have helped us change the city's speeches, stories and language. However, the question that remains is how to build and use urban food maps to reach our social goals without "handing over" this knowledge to an oppressive system that seeks to usurp us of the right to a fair and equal urban life.

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