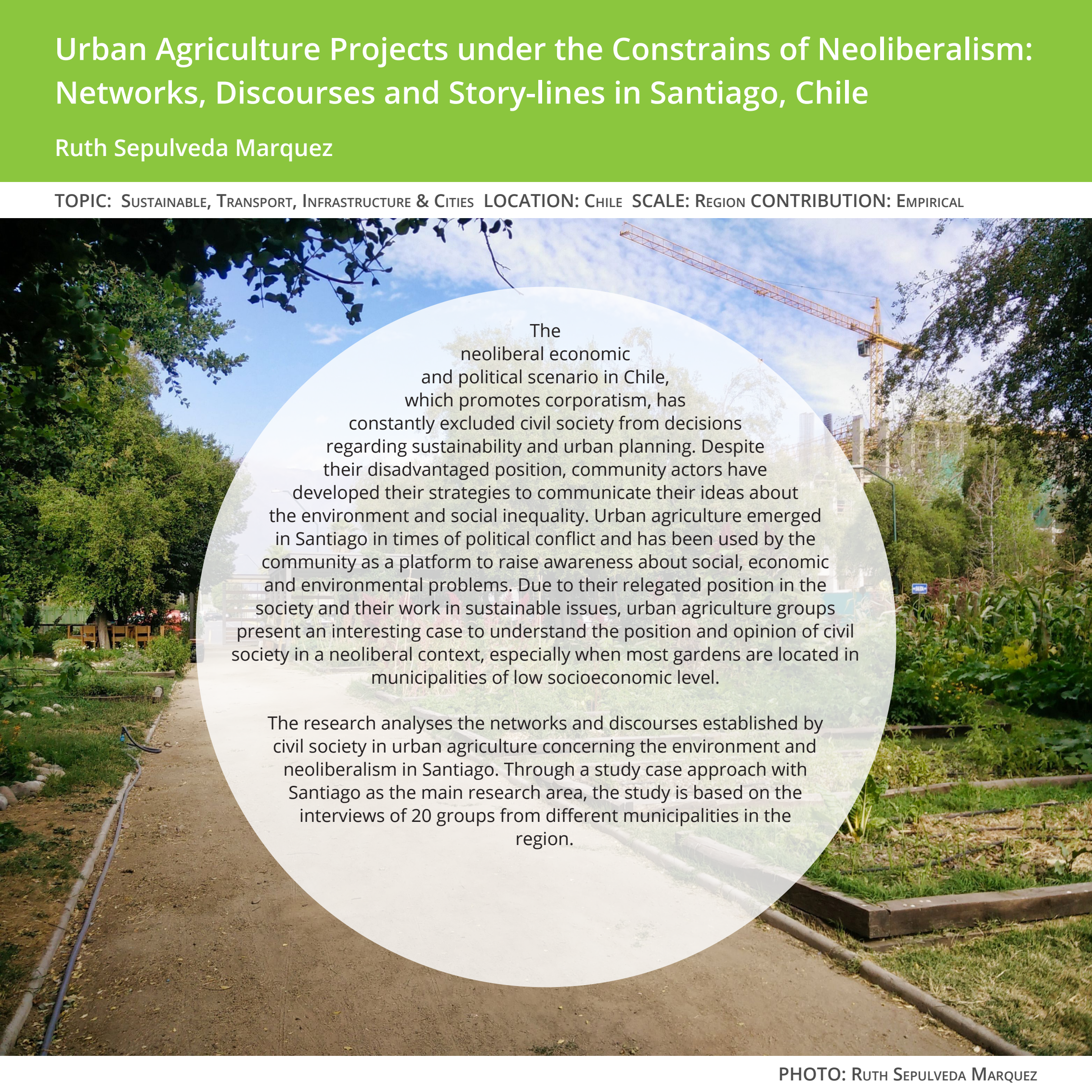


Urban Agriculture Projects under the Constrains of Neoliberalism: Networks, Discourses and Story-lines in Santiago, Chile

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The background image shows an urban garden with several raised beds containing various plants. A dirt path runs through the garden. In the background, a tall construction crane is visible against a blue sky with some clouds. The scene is surrounded by lush green trees and foliage.

The neoliberal economic and political scenario in Chile, which promotes corporatism, has constantly excluded civil society from decisions regarding sustainability and urban planning. Despite their disadvantaged position, community actors have developed their strategies to communicate their ideas about the environment and social inequality. Urban agriculture emerged in Santiago in times of political conflict and has been used by the community as a platform to raise awareness about social, economic and environmental problems. Due to their relegated position in the society and their work in sustainable issues, urban agriculture groups present an interesting case to understand the position and opinion of civil society in a neoliberal context, especially when most gardens are located in municipalities of low socioeconomic level.

The research analyses the networks and discourses established by civil society in urban agriculture concerning the environment and neoliberalism in Santiago. Through a study case approach with Santiago as the main research area, the study is based on the interviews of 20 groups from different municipalities in the region.

PHOTO: RUTH SEPULVEDA MARQUEZ

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Cities are areas where social actors display new ideas about nature and promote new discourses to mitigate socioeconomic problems. A new environmental awareness among the civil society has motivated the development of urban agriculture projects (UAP) as a partial solution for various problems in Chile. This research investigates the emergence of urban agriculture projects in Santiago as groups of resistance to the current economic and social system. This involves understanding how these UAP relate to other social actors and the main discourses circulating from their work,

The growth of new collaborative initiatives among previously excluded or ignored actors is a response to an increase in environmental awareness in Santiago due to rapid urbanization, economic development, population growth and spatial expansion affecting the city. However, it is unclear how the current Chilean neoliberal economic and political scenario has allowed the participation and collaboration of civil society in UAP when neoliberal discourses are still strong in planning decisions, the state still has a strong connection with the market and the private sector continues to influence the modifications of legal documents to its benefit.

Neoliberalism, which Chile implemented during the dictatorial period in the '70s, has had a great impact on the relationships between social actors. Since the transfer of most decisions on land use and planning to the private sector (Arenas & Hidalgo, 2014; Undurraga, 2015), relations between the actors have become unstable. The return to democracy in 1990 did not imply a retreat from the free-market logic, but rather its deepening. This situation allowed the economic elites to maintain their positions as the main political powers in decision-making, to continue some old policies and to promote new forms

of privatisation of economic activities. The neoliberal system limits and exclude the participation of voices that do not represent economic technocracy or that threaten their concept of society. However, the emergence of civil society in this scenario reconfigures the relationships between the connections and discourses of social actors on the neoliberal society. In a way, actors in UAP are recovering their right to the city through direct opposition and resistance to the prevalent neoliberal discourse that has penetrated different aspects of Chile's social and political life. Actors are generating their own participatory spaces, forming connections with other actors to extend their range of influence and developing new environmental discourses.

Through a qualitative approach, the study explores the connections and discourses around UAP in Santiago. Document analysis and semi-structured interviews were carried out with different actors from civil society and the state. The results show that UAP are constantly challenging the concept of city and land imposed by the economic system. They see the space as an area for social connections instead of a good to commercialise, which they use to raise social, economic and environmental awareness about the problems in the society. They include the participation of a variety of actors in horizontal organizational structures where knowledge and experience are valued more than professional training, emphasizing the recovering of indigenous and rural expertise and the circulation of knowledge between actors and groups. They also face the consequences of the lack of legislation regarding green areas and urban agriculture in their relationship with the municipality, where they are in constant conflict due to the use of the space and suffering of their relocation.