



## International Partnership in Community Economic Development

# The Rooftop Garden Project





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*The Rooftop Garden Project is built on the recognition that communities world over face many similar challenges including food security, climate change, and difficult inner-city living conditions.*

This profile is one of four stories examining international partnership in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been prepared to showcase several examples of effective models of international collaboration and knowledge exchange that distribute contribution, benefit, and risk amongst all involved. They are examples of ends that were made possible because people were working together. For the other profiles and more information on the project, please see the notes at the end of this document or go to our website at <http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/international.asp>.

The Rooftop Garden Project is the product of a unique partnership between two organizations based in Montreal: a local community-driven organization and an international cooperation network. Together they are combining local and global experience to bring innovative urban agriculture to the Montreal community.

#### Context

During its twelve years in operation in the Plateau Mont Royal neighbourhood of Montreal, **Santropol Roulant** has developed a rich and important place within the

community. This innovative organization was founded by two young community-members in 1995 and to this day is run by young people and volunteers. The engine of the organization is an innovative meals-on-wheels program that functions to address economic and social isolation of Montreal seniors and individuals living with a loss of autonomy.<sup>i</sup> In addition to preparing and delivering up to 90<sup>ii</sup> healthy, delicious, and ecologically mindful meals a day, the program also acts as a hub for a web of other imaginative projects.

One of these initiatives is the *Rooftop Garden Project*: greening communities, helping Montrealers grow their own food, and bringing people together through productive urban gardening in small city spaces ranging from rooftops to staircases.<sup>iii</sup> The project is made possible by a deep and unique partnership between *Santropol Roulant* and *Alternatives; Action and Communication Network for International Development*. Alternatives is a Montreal-based international cooperation organization supporting community-based initiatives through a global partnership network in over 30 countries with the aim of combating political, social, and economic injustice.

Alternatives also works to foster an understanding within the Canadian public of the links between local and international actions, experiences, and policy debates<sup>iv</sup>.

At exactly this intersection of local and global challenges and solutions lies the Rooftop Garden Project. Combining Santropol

**Santropol Roulant:**

- Founded and run by young people in the community
- Brings community members together across cultures and generations through its innovative meals-on-wheels service and intergenerational activities, workshops, and programs.
- Uses food to address issues of social and economic isolation, health, and food security in the Montreal community
- Aims to build a sustainable urban food cycle within its work and community (SR)

Roulant's roots in the Montreal Community and Alternatives' experience working internationally with urban agriculture, the two organizations are successfully collaborating to bring rooftop gardening to Montrealers (RG).

*All over the world rapidly growing cities are expanding into the most productive agricultural lands as economics, culture and history conspire to replace farms with suburbs. We are running headlong into a crisis where rising populations rely on shrinking farmlands. To avert or delay the crisis, food distribution is becoming more and more influenced by, and dependent on, international markets and the additional risks that these bring.*

#### Alternatives:

- Works to promote political, social, and economic justice in the North and the South
- Supports community based initiatives in Latin America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Central, South and Southeast Asia
- Educates the Canadian public about links between Canadian and International policy
- Supports the building of international networks to facilitate the sharing of experience and information (Alternatives)

*In these same cities almost none of the food consumed is grown locally. People have become disconnected from the cycles that support their lives, having little knowledge of where their food is grown, how it is cultivated, or how nutritious it is. Such dependence on outside sources to meet basic needs puts city-dwellers more at risk to food insecurity. We are challenged to find ways to reintegrate food production into the cityscape, to reconnect people with the ecological and agricultural processes that sustain them.<sup>v</sup>*

#### History

Behind the Rooftop Garden Project that exists today is a history that travelled globally before landing in Montreal.

#### Published by

Canadian CED Network  
211-620 View Street  
Victoria, BC V8W 1J6  
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This document was compiled by Katie Mazer.

An electronic copy of this document will be available on the CCEDNet website  
<http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca>

*Ce document sera aussi disponible en français.*

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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Taken from <http://www.santropolroulant.org/2006/E-mission.htm> on July 3, 2007. For the remainder of the document, any material sourced from the Rooftop Santropol Roulant website on July 3, 2007 will be identified as (SR).

<sup>ii</sup> Brodhead, Farrar. "Youth in CED: Santropol Roulant." Victoria: Canadian CED Network, 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> Taken from "About Us," <http://rooftopgardens.ca> on July 3, 2007. For the remainder of the document, any material sourced from the Rooftop Gardens website on July 3, 2007 will be identified as (RG).

<sup>iv</sup> Taken from "About Us," <http://www.alternatives.ca/article99.html?lang=en> on July 3, 2007. For the remainder of the document, any material sourced from the Alternatives website on July 3, 2007 will be identified as (Alternatives).

<sup>v</sup> Hill, Alex and Jane Rabinowicz, "The Santropol Roulant & Alternatives Rooftop Garden: Reflections on an Innovative Collaboration." P. 1. For the remainder of the document any material sourced to this article will be marked as (Reflections, p.#).

<sup>vi</sup> Taken from [http://rooftopgardens.ca/files/intl\\_description.pdf](http://rooftopgardens.ca/files/intl_description.pdf), P. 3.

<sup>vii</sup> For more information volunteer engagement at Santropol Roulant see: Nilsson, W.O. *The Southern Wall; Organizational Engagement at Santropol Roulant*. Sept. 2003.

Santropol Roulant has been able to have its members engage directly in learning from and working with CED and social economy projects in other parts of the world, building a global solidarity dimension to their work that gives their members added learning, experience and inspiration. This form of international networking lends credibility to a global movement that is growing in significance and prominence. Through exchanges such as these, Canada's CED sector can play an important role in expanding support for alternative community-based approaches to sustainable development, at home and abroad.

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*Many thanks to Ismaël Hautecoeur & Jane Rabinowicz for contributing their time, experience, and thoughts to this project.*

Alternatives' very first inspiration for building a rooftop garden project in Montreal came from work that was being done at the Institute for Simplified Hydroponics in Tehuacan, Mexico. An American by the name of Peggy Bradley was developing innovative soil-less techniques for growing produce in poor rural communities. The prospect of affordable, ecologically sustainable, and low-tech soil-less gardening had immediate appeal for Alternatives; rooftop gardens grown in soil are a problem and often require expensive building retrofits in cold climates such as Montreal as they strain the roofs when combined with the weight of the snow in winter (Reflections, p. 1). With a long and active history of collective gardening and beautiful flat rooftops on which to grow plants, the city of Montreal seemed like the perfect setting in which to adapt and establish a project aimed at nourishing the Montreal community and developing a global learning and experimentation network around solutions to urban food challenges.

*C'était un vrai vas-et-viens entre le Nord et le Sud.*

*-- Ismaël Hautecoeur, Alternatives*

Bringing rooftop gardening to Montreal also held appeal as a reciprocation of community development learning between Canadian initiatives and Alternatives' Southern partners.

*Alternatives' international partners in mega-cities like Sao Paulo, Jakarta and Casablanca were looking for new ways to address urban poverty and dire inner-city environment conditions. High rates of population growth, income inequality, land degradation and soil erosion, as well as a host of institutional and economic factors that limit food security in the urban context are causing endemic hunger in these cities. At the same time, partners in*

**Cuba** has a strong history in urban agriculture. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered into major crisis and transition and found itself facing rising problems of hunger and malnutrition. An essential part of the food system put in place to counter these problems, through maximizing productivity and minimizing transport, was urban agriculture – now an important part of local economic and food security.

[http://rooftopgardens.ca/files/intl\\_description.pdf](http://rooftopgardens.ca/files/intl_description.pdf)

*Mexico, Senegal and Cuba were experimenting with innovative hydroponics and organic agriculture techniques that reduce the cost and limitations of producing vegetables on degraded lands and in cities. Thus Alternatives began a program to share and demonstrate ideas that tackle food security and hunger issues around the world. (Reflections, p.1-2)*

*In Dakar, **Senegal** over 70% of consumed fruits and vegetables in the city are produced within city limits.<sup>vi</sup>*

Jane Rabinowicz of Santropol Roulant reflects on the early stages of the project: “Alternatives was looking into urban agriculture internationally but with a local focus. The project was never built on a model of North Americans simply helping others but rather, understanding how we could facilitate a real two-way exchange. Why wouldn’t Alternatives have a local presence? It’s an amazing idea to bring rooftop gardening to Montreal given the city’s history of community agriculture and its flat roofs!”

In 2001 experimentation and adaptation of ideas and techniques from the Institute for Simplified Hydroponics began in Montreal. Since this time, Alternatives has collaborated with established partners in Cuba, Morocco, Senegal, and South Africa experimenting with various innovative agricultural technologies as alternative ways to produce food in their given urban environments (Reflections, p. 2).

All the while, back home in Montreal...

“Santropol Roulant had a host of young people interested in urban ecology and food security. Expression of interest had begun to emerge about evolving a gardening component to the organization’s work to supply produce for its own meals-on-wheels operations,” remembers Jane. While unable to access its own office’s rooftop, these conditions at Santropol Roulant converged perfectly with the rise of Alternatives new local urban agriculture initiative (Reflections, p. 2).

Santropol Roulant began to contribute ideas and volunteers to the rooftop garden initiatives and in the summer of 2004 the two

## **Strengthening CED**

What does this story mean for CCEDNet and CED in Canada? This project demonstrates how a local CED organization was able to:

### *Use International Partnership to Strengthen Local Practice*

Santropol Roulant was able to adapt technology and practice being used in urban communities in other countries to directly strengthen its own practices in sustainable community development. The transfer of knowledge about small scale urban agriculture production from Cuban and other settings had direct application to increasing local sustainable food production in Montreal. This kind of example of learning from and adapting community development practice from international to Canadian community settings offers great potential for other CED organizations and the sector as a whole that CCEDNet and its International Committee can build upon. It also shows the importance of a two way transfer of knowledge and practice amongst CED organizations (not just development aid from Canada to the South!), an important principle that CCEDNet’s International Committee is advocating.

### *Build the Community Voice in International Networking*

Santropol Roulant developed an effective partnership with Alternatives, to become a direct player in the agency’s international networking. As a result a youth-led grassroots community development organization became an active contributor to international dialogue and action alongside an NGO intermediary organization. An authentic and active voice of community is engaged as a result in ongoing networking and discussions on foreign policy, trade, and development. For CCEDNet this kind of model offers potential for legitimate engagement of its members in discourse on and influencing of international policy issues from a community solidarity perspective.

### *Contribute to a Global Movement*

Internationally, the vision is of a local partnership that nourishes an international learning and action network. The goal is, through the partnership in Cuba, to establish a strong, ongoing, and reciprocal urban agriculture project that incorporates new and old international partners.

## **On Partnership**

### *Complémentarité...*

*Alternatives est une ONG de développement international. En gros, des bureaucrates. On n'est pas une organisation communautaire, on n'a pas de communauté. Notre communauté ne se trouve pas localement, mais à l'international.*

*To realize such projects, we work with groups that have local communities. Alternatives can provide resources, experience, logistical support...*

*We accompany our partners to implement garden projects. The idea is that in 2-3 years they become their gardens. With Santropol Roulant, they are developing spaces for community – nourishing seniors and working with youth. Our partnership allows us to green the city in a more stimulating way...Et c'est la même chose à l'international.*

*-- Ismaël Hautecoeur, Alternatives*

Jane Rabinowicz speaks to one final lesson learned from the project: “This project holds amazing potential for what can be communicated about the power of partnership. It’s so important to pay attention to this; to think about this power and communicate it to the max.”

The Rooftop Gardens Project is built on recognition of shared challenges, a respect of diverse experience and expertise, and a belief that collaboration can bring us all to new heights. The story is convincing.

organizations teamed up to build the initiative’s first project: a 500m<sup>2</sup> demonstration rooftop garden (Reflections, p. 2).

Jane considers the complimentary nature of the two organizations: “Santropol Roulant is very anchored in the local context. Alternatives was able to bring technological experience, know-how and resources. The Roulant brought a local community understanding, a successful volunteer model<sup>vii</sup>, and an end product for the work in the garden that made it that much more meaningful.”

## **Activities**

### *Technological Experimentation*

Since day one the garden has functioned as a platform for experimentation and learning. Early in the project, this experimentation was largely technical. Inspired by models developed in Mexico and around the world, the team set out to develop an affordable, ecologically sustainable, and low-tech rooftop gardening system adapted to the climatic and cultural context of Montreal. Through this exploration, they hoped to develop an expertise that could be shared internationally.

*It's a project that really lives in the realm of the imagination...  
To see these images come to life was amazing.*

*-- Jane Rabinowicz, Santropol Roulant*

Through this process of trial and error, the project has slowly moved away from simplified hydroponics as the necessary chemical input was not consistent with the values of the project. A semi-hydroponic self watering system has largely taken its place – using soil and compost as the nutritive element rather than chemicals – which is simpler, less expensive, and organic. Other community partners in the Montreal community are beginning to adopt these new technological models, empowering them to build and maintain their own gardens.

### *Organizational Experimentation*

Some unique qualities of the Rooftop Garden Project have led to an environment of organizational experimentation as well. The gardens are dependent on a high level of community involvement and volunteer commitment. Drawing inspiration from Santropol Roulant's experience and success in community mobilization, in addition to models from other collective gardens, the project has combined and reinvented ideas to produce a model appropriate to the organizational culture they have created. The project now has a solid volunteer base, reliable strong turnout at public events, and hundreds of subscribers to its list serve.

### *Public Learning & Community Collaboration*

The garden itself is a public education tool. Those who choose to be involved in its maintenance have the opportunity to get their hands dirty and learn to garden by engaging directly in the practice. The demonstration garden is sustained by the committed work of volunteers and community members. The gardens also serve as important community gathering spaces that would otherwise be left empty; they are used to host workshops, public learning events about local and international issues, and celebrations about food production, collaboration, and revising urban space (RG).

The project has also served as a model of possibilities, supporting the establishment and demonstration of gardens managed by various organization types including community groups, institutions, cooperatives, and subsidized housing projects.

### *Expanding the Vision Locally*

The project holds a local vision of a liberated cityscape in which residents who wish to garden have the opportunity to do so. The

“The food that we grow and harvest in the Montreal demonstration garden is cultivated entirely by volunteers and members of our community, and goes directly to nourishing seniors and others living with a loss of autonomy.” (RG)

*Identity & Ownership:* As a project born out of two organizations, how is it perceived? How does this affect the project? Who owns the material?

*Integration:* Each organization has its own mandate and priorities into which these new themes must be integrated.

*Reciprocity:* Locally and internationally, a process of constant evaluation must be maintained to understand expectations and ensure that the partnerships are leaving all parties better endowed.

### **Future Directions**

Locally, the vision is of a Montreal with significant and visible rooftop gardening in which more people have the chance to nourish themselves through the food they grow and the fresh perspective they gain.

*“There’s something liberating about an unobstructed horizon...”*

*The long term goal is not to help people garden, but to create space for people to garden... to take on the role of facilitator rather than implementer.”*

*- Jane Rabinowicz, Santropol Roulant*

Increasing the scale of rooftop gardening in Montreal would ultimately happen through an opening-up of institutional roofs for community use. Alternatives and Santropol Roulant hope to be instrumental in creating this opening; helping the city to recognize the benefits of urban gardening and encouraging them to work directly with citizens to make it grow.

The two organizations also hope to revisit the project goals and plans; to increase the long-term stability of the project; and to ensure the continuation of a culture of gardening in both organizations.

## *International Outcomes*

The local expertise that Alternatives has gained through the Rooftop Garden project offers has allowed the organization to integrate urban agriculture into other development projects with existing and future international partners.

Internationally, the project has realized its success when presented with unforeseen positives. These have included international partner visits to Montreal and established international partners deciding to incorporate this project.

Project participants are engaged in an ongoing process to evaluate and improve the affordability, ecological sustainability, and accessibility of the project and its technology.

## **Success Factors & Lessons Learned**

While the Rooftop Garden Project has been a successful model of partnership on many scales, it has seen its share of challenges.

*Communication:* Two organizations managing the project have different mandates and cultures. They work in separate offices in a bilingual city. “With Alternatives, maintaining clear lines of communication has been half the work.” The international partners are spread globally, live in many languages and cultures, and sometimes lack phone and Internet access. Building clear lines of communication, understanding and discussing language, avoiding jargon, and maintaining honesty about potential contribution have all helped manage this challenge.

*Turnover:* While the many youth involved in the project have injected it with energy and enthusiasm, they have also brought a high level of turnover. This poses challenges for the maintenance of vision and values.

*Identifying Partners:* When an organization disintegrates, its projects go with it. Building strong personal relationships that can withstand these transitions and carefully identifying partner organizations is essential to the international sustainability of this project.

Rooftop Garden Project aims to help Montrealers claim ownership over the space around them and its potential productivity.

Tools have been developed to support individuals and organizational partners in the construction of their own urban gardens and the pursuit of this vision. For those receiving direct support of the project, the hope is that after two or three years, these gardens will become autonomous.

With the successful realization of the demonstration garden, a large abstract element has been removed from the urban agriculture dream. “It’s a project that really lives in the realm of the imagination...to see these images come to life was amazing (Jane Rabinowicz).” Photos, videos, and real stories help create a clear picture of what is possible.

## *Expanding the Vision Globally*

Within this context of local work and intimate relationships, the Rooftop Garden Project has not lost sight of its connection to larger scale change. After a four-year process of participatory information gathering and experimentation in Montreal, the success of the project has expanded the possibilities for international partnership in urban agriculture. Alternatives is taking action on its vision of an international learning network for urban agriculture and community mobilization.

*“Nos partenaires internationaux sont des multiplicateurs”*

*-- Ismaël Hauteceur, Alternatives*

Returning to its partnership with the *Fundacion de la Naturaleza y Hombre* in Cuba, Alternatives will contribute their new expertise to a project that was central to much of their initial learning. These two success stories have formed an alliance to develop a Southern model of urban agriculture. Capitalizing on cultural and environmental similarities amongst communities in the greater region, this new knowledge-sharing network is to be based and disseminated out of Cuba.

The Rooftop Garden Project has also drawn international visitors to Montreal from Alternatives’ global network for learning

exchanges. These exchanges, which can be several months long, allow Alternatives to thoroughly share concrete information about the Montreal project with partners working on similar projects in their home communities. Moreover, these visits facilitate the formation of strong individual relationships and help foster and understanding of diverse realities, shared challenges, and the possibility of common support for solutions.

### *Growing Food*

Last but not least, this partnership has grown a lot of food. In the summer of 2006, the project managed to produce one third of the food used by the Santropol Roulant meals-on-wheels program in their urban Montreal gardens. What does that amount to? One tonne of food!

### **Support**

When asked about the most valuable resources to the project, without hesitation Jane Rabinowicz of Santropol Roulant answered, "The people." The project has captured the interest and support of staff, volunteers, and community members alike.

The networking piece of the project - connecting with partners locally and internationally - is supported by Alternatives. As a community organization that would not have the resources to realize this alone, it is an important contribution to the project that the Roulant highly appreciates.

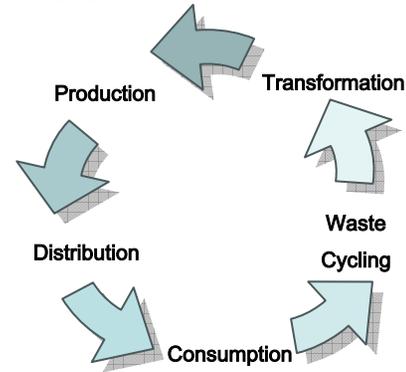
Internationally, financial resources can be a challenge. Much of the available funding for the project's international presence is reserved for internships which can present challenges for the project's continuity.

### **Outcomes & Evaluation**

The Rooftop Garden Project has demonstrated important outcomes at the organizational, local, and international scales.

#### *Organizational Outcomes*

The partnership built between Alternatives and Santropol Roulant has brought both organizations to a place neither would have arrived on their own. Alternatives has developed the knowledge to introduced a whole new set of themes to their public engagement and international action: environment, agriculture, and food security.



***Closed food cycling at Santropol Roulant***

The project has allowed Santropol Roulant to close the loop of their meals-on-wheels operation; the organization is now directly involved in the production, transformation, distribution, consumption, and waste cycling of their meals. This achievement has greatly helped the organization to fulfil its self-image as a responsible community member.

Additionally, it has provided an engaging image and public message about the values inherent in the organization's work.

Both partners have learned from each others' organizational cultures and have engaged in the important construction of a concrete link between local action and global thinking.

#### *Local Outcomes*

Measuring the local success of the project is done using a holistic series of environmental, social, food security, and inspiration (second degree impact) indicators ranging from the amount of food produced to the number of community participants to the amount of rainwater captured.

A major local accomplishment for the project has been to see its Montreal partner organizations develop autonomy in the maintenance and management of their own garden projects. More and more of the involved local organizations are adding gardening as a central and ongoing component of their work.