



The Family Garden Initiative: SALEM Ecuador's strategy for a changing community

July 16, 2020

Mindo, Ecuador

This past Sunday, July 12 2020, SALEM Ecuador volunteers prepared and delivered hundreds of seedlings and sacks of compost to local families that participate in the SALEM Ecuador Family Garden Initiative. All shades of green covered the worktable at the SALEM Center where baby lettuce, tomato, cilantro, peppers, sweet potatoes, chayote and other tropical plants were carefully separated and tied in banana leaves for safe transport to over 20 budding family gardens throughout the town of Mindo, Ecuador. Jonas Lange, Director of SALEM Ecuador and horticulturist gets to the heart of the matter, "The garden is a therapeutic space. The Family Garden Initiative is a perfect opportunity for the SALEM team to get out and visit local families, check in, provide gardening assistance while interacting with the family as a whole during this shelter in place period."

With the support of several professional horticulturalists, dedicated organic gardeners, and forestry engineers volunteering their time and expertise during the following months, over a hundred Mindo residents are starting or improving their home gardens while sheltering in place. Thanks to the SALEM team's ability to assess local needs, respond quickly with action plans and calmly face the challenges that COVID 19 has presented to the community, the Family Garden Initiative has been a spontaneous and successful strategy for maintaining contact and communication with the families that SALEM serves during this national and global health emergency.

The Family Garden Initiative creates opportunities to come together and provide much-needed emotional and family support to struggling families who have hard burdens to bear. Educational challenges, lack of steady work, living in potentially violent or abusive surroundings, food insecurity, and a growing drug scene are some of the issues local families deal with outside of the global pandemic. Lange adds, "The teens and younger kids are greatly benefiting from having activities and responsibilities related to their family's garden. Gardening at home provides an outlet to navigate the difficult circumstances they find themselves in."

Since March 2020, the community of Mindo, Ecuador, a town nestled in the cloud forest and home to over 4000 low-income residents, has been coping with the consequences of the COVID 19 health emergency and shelter in place requirement. Located on the equator line in South America, Mindo has been a charming tourist destination for national and international travelers for over 20 years. More than 90% of the local population is dedicated to, or benefits directly from, providing services for short to long term visits from travelers looking to connect with the natural surroundings and adventure activities found in this tropical biodiverse area. In the middle of March, from one day to the next, the community of Mindo found themselves without work, without income, and with no social security safety net.

The same week that Ecuador declared an emergency health crisis and closed its international borders to prevent further spread of COVID 19, SALEM Ecuador immediately shifted its roll from providing social and educational services to children, adolescents, and their families at the peaceful, shady SALEM Center in the center of Mindo to preparing and delivering weekly grocery baskets to needy families in the community. Now more than ever, local families struggle to put sufficient healthy food on the table. During the months of April and May of this year, local volunteers helped separate large food donations into smaller boxes for



families at the SALEM Center. Their efforts gave relief to low income families on a weekly basis by distributing a combination of dry goods and fresh vegetables and fruits. The initiative to send donated packets of seeds with the food baskets began after only a few weeks. Soon, SALEM families that registered for the Family Garden Initiative learned to prepare the soil, germinate the seeds, and balance sun, water, and growing conditions to ensure successful crops.

The seed donations have taken on a life of their own and the SALEM team has risen to the occasion. As SALEM families share ideas and experiences within the context of the current health and economic crisis, we are there to support them with a positive, proactive, and empowering central theme. Local organic farmers and horticulturalists are there to offer advice, visiting local gardens and donating any extra seedlings they have. What began as a tiny sprout has become a life force spiraling out, evolving into thriving family gardens. What better way to face an uncertain economic future but to dig up the earth, prepare the soil, sweat in the summer sun, lay down seeds, and watch as hope is born in the form of two-leaved shoots.

Although it's unlikely that most families will become self-sufficient with their home gardens, it is highly likely that the SALEM team will continue to provide encouragement and support to economically and socially vulnerable families during this current pandemic period. It's a way to take the pulse of the community during a time when gatherings and events aren't possible. SALEM Ecuador values such as respect, honesty, trust, and patience that begin in the garden can be exercised and applied in the home. It's possible there won't be medium-sized or large events at the beautiful, tree-filled SALEM Center for a while to come, so SALEM has found a way to come to the families that most need support during these changing times.

Do you want to see this program grow and bloom into a permanent project for SALEM families to participate in? Please make a donation to the SALEM Ecuador Family Garden Initiative by giving online @ <http://salem-ecuador.org/donate/> , where you can also find information about our legal charitable status.

You can learn more about other projects and initiatives here: <http://salem-ecuador.org/news/>

We currently need help with the **Teen Center Cabin Remodel, Family Garden Initiative** and **SALEM Counseling Project**. If you or your group or association would like to learn more about these activities, please don't hesitate to reach out to molly@salem-ecuador.org

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