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local work

Green shoots?
The potential role of urban agriculture in regenerating our urban areas

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Introduction

During the 'May events' of 1968, radical French students devised a slogan - 'Sous le trottoir, la plage' (Under the pavement, the beach). It was a succinct expression of desire for a more leisured and aesthetic existence. Finding its way onto banners and posters across the world, it seemed to promise an end to capitalism's pragmatism in 'the festival of the oppressed', when revolution would turn the surreal into the real, reveal the unconscious and fulfil our hidden desires.

Today the world may have forgotten such marvellous dreams, but a new generation of radicals has emerged with visions to meet the challenges of a changed world. The 1960s are dead, they seem to say, long live the 2010s. Under their pavements, there are fields.

Urban agriculture (UA) is the dream of these new revolutionaries; having seeded itself in the developing world it is now producing fruit in the developed world. Architects in New York, Amsterdam and London plan productive roof gardens, vertical farms and a world of 'active design'; guerrilla growers in West Yorkshire plant herbs on waste ground; young activists everywhere talk of 'transition towns', growing your own, and a food industry that is sustainable and ethical.

The irony is that a movement that began life in the desperation of the impoverished city dwellers of Africa, Asia and Latin America is rapidly becoming a political gesture - if not a lifestyle choice - for the richest communities on the globe.

Urban agriculture

Precisely how many urban agriculturists there are is difficult to estimate, partly because almost all the research on the topic concentrates on a few cities in the southern hemisphere and partly because, by its very nature, urban agriculture tends to be informal, uncoordinated and unrecorded.

The best figures we have go back well over a decade to 1996 when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the world's food produce was generated by about 800 million urban farmers and gardeners – that's to say 14 percent of the global population (1). If accurate, these figures suggest that urban agriculture is at least efficient enough to abolish hunger.

Yet the precise meaning of 'urban agriculture' is elusive. The obvious definition – the practice of agriculture

within city limits – can be misleading. Modern urban sprawl means that physical boundaries are often unclear, while political boundaries are no more reliable, particularly given the rise of 'greater' metropolitan authorities. Take Liverpool, for example, where Urbanag has been involved recently in developing a 'food alliance' (2). The idea for the alliance originated with the development company for Liverpool City but explicitly covers 'Greater Liverpool' (which includes parts of Sefton, Knowsley, Haydock and St. Helens), and involves organisations operating in all of Merseyside (which includes Southport, the Wirral and other parts of Cheshire).

In practice, we included 'peri-urban' (peripheral to cities) within the category of 'urban'. This is quite common. For example, the much vaunted success of Havana in feeding its own people – which has been described as 'a miracle' - is based on the fact that some 35,000 ha of land outside the metropolis is included for the purpose of urban agriculture (3). This is more than three times the entire area of the city of Liverpool.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) - noting that "there is not yet a universally agreed-upon definition" (4) - combines urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) by default. The FAO is clear that there is a viable distinction between UPA and rural agriculture, but the difference can only be understood instrumentally, in terms of the creation of local food systems for the supply of cities. The critical word is 'local' which, in this context, demands a relative interpretation. Urban agriculture is the practice of producing as much as possible of a city's food supply as close as possible to the people who will eat it.

What's it for?

With around half the world now living in cities, and these cities increasingly remote from their sources of food, there are plenty of reasons to promote urban agriculture. In the 1980s, the United Nations believed it could address rising urban poverty in the developing world and placed it firmly within the context of climate change, urbanisation, oil dependency and food insecurity. Others saw it as "an alternative urban food strategy" to mitigate the impact of structural adjustment policies (5).

Rapid urbanisation and the crisis of formal economies do seem to have stimulated the development of an informal urban agricultural sector in much of developing world. In Cuba, the US economic blockade provided the stimulus; 'food sovereignty' became a political necessity. In China, enforced industrialisation and urbanisation led to water shortages and a rapid loss of arable land accessible to the new inhabitants of the country's sprawling megalopolises; urban agriculture became critical to the future growth of China's cities.

The situation is different in the developed world. Most of our urban agriculture is small scale by comparison to Cuba or China and often dismissed, with some justice, as a hobby for the privileged. The British Horticultural Trades Association has suggested that urban produce may be increasingly popular in countries like the UK because of an essentially middle-class "appetite for local, simple and authentic products, a distaste for waste, a growing interest in green issues and a return to homes and gardens, friends and family" (6). And yet, in another twist of irony, poverty, declining urban populations and industrial decay may turn out to be more important drivers in the longer term in the richer countries of Europe and North America.

For example, much publicity has been generated by the 'Grown in Detroit' project and the city's six-year old 'Garden Resource Program'. These were explicit responses to the problems of post-industrialism in a city where the iconic industry of the twentieth century was in virtual collapse. Detroit started to grow and sell its own food, and created an infrastructure to support these activities.

Actually, Detroit's urban agriculture goes back at least 20 years to the beginnings of the 'Greening of Detroit' project. Like the Green Infrastructure programme in the UK, the 'Greening of Detroit' focused from its inception on improving the quality of life in the city through the creation of green spaces and urban forest. But, as with Green Infrastructure, it has proved impossible to separate out the aesthetic and activity-based aspects of 'greening' from the opportunity and the need to grow food among the poorest and most deprived members of inner-city communities.

In many cities facing post-industrial decline, one of the biggest problems for low-income communities is 'food poverty' - the lack of readily available fresh and nutritious food. The UK Government's Nutrition Task

Force reported in 1996 that areas with inadequate access to food retailers were increasing and that some places had already become ‘food deserts’ (7). A few months later, the new Government’s Social Exclusion Unit confirmed the spread of food deserts and said that some local stores could be 60 percent more expensive than other food shops (8).

The consequences of food poverty are well understood. Poor nutrition is associated with an increased incidence of obesity, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, depression and various forms of cancer. It can affect mental ability, behaviour and alertness. The cost to health services is substantial – for example, the European Nutrition for Health Alliance estimates that malnutrition costs the UK up to £7.4 billion a year (9) while the NHS has estimated the medical costs of obesity in 2007 to be £4.2 billion, rising to £6.3 billion by 2015 (10).

Urban agriculture might help. Available, unused urban land could be turned over to cultivation in order to provide fresh food to impoverished communities.

It seems like a no-brainer.

Poverty means that people spend a higher than average proportion of their income on food yet eat less nutritiously. According to the Office of National Statistics, the poorest quartile of society in the UK spends around 15 percent of its weekly household expenditure on food – about double the percentage for the richest quartile (11). As food prices rise, the quality of food consumed tends to fall.

But the connection between poverty and poor diet is not a necessary one. Our work with ethnic and refugee communities in Liverpool suggests that they will often seek out culturally familiar fresh foods even at substantial expense. And this is supported by academic research (12).

We could conclude that if you allow communities to grow their own food, the benefits will follow – except that food culture in many of the UK’s established communities has itself been impoverished. This is largely due to public policies developed in the last century that sought to maintain low prices for basic foods while delivering standardised health objectives based largely on calorific value. Such policies were aimed at the entirely laudable goal of ending hunger and malnutrition. But they encouraged the mass production and distribution of food, promoted cheap carbohydrate, and tended to undervalue variety and cultural expression.

In much of the developed world, the first people to realise that there might be something wrong with contemporary food systems were the young middle class. It was part of a rebellion against mass society which gave rise to a philosophy of ‘sustainability’, combining a set of interlocking ideologies elevating the local over the global, the organic over the synthetic, and energy conservation over energy profligacy.

Sustainability in this sense dates back to the early seventies when the libertarian, refusenik ideas of the sixties met the first global oil crisis of 1973. Its founding document is the economist E.F. Schumacher’s groundbreaking book ‘Small Is Beautiful’ (1973). The food industry was among the first to be identified as unsustainable and the phrase “eating oil” was coined in 1978 and used as the title of an influential book highlighting the critical role of fossil fuels at every stage of the food supply chain from planting to preparation (13).

Organic farming can reduce agriculture’s reliance on fossil fuels, but localising food production may have even more impact. In both these areas we have mountains to climb – the organic food market in the UK represents, at most, two percent of the total, while the market for local food is less than half that. Meanwhile, food supply chains continue to lengthen. Twenty years after the publication of ‘Eating Oil’, the amount of food transported within the UK had increased by 16 percent and the distances travelled by 50 percent (14). Petrol price protests, unusually heavy snowfalls and volcanic eruptions have all threatened our food supplies and demonstrated just how dependent we have become on processed petroleum and long supply chains. We are, they say, three meals away from revolution.

That thought concerns UK governments.

In 2006 the UK Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs reported on a 'Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food'. It concluded, worryingly, that "the self-sufficiency ratio of domestic production to consumption has been in noticeable decline over the last decade" (15).

Yet despite acknowledging food insecurity, the role of EU policy and trade liberalisation in further reducing UK and European agricultural production, and problems with "the power of globally-sourcing supermarkets"; plummeting farm incomes; food safety concerns; environmental issues; and problems with fuel and energy security ", DEFRA argued against "a narrow focus on agricultural self-sufficiency" and for enhancing the resilience of global food supply chains (15).

Of course, a change in government may bring a change in agricultural policy. But it is unlikely that DEFRA's explicit recognition that energy insecurity will reduce the affordability of nutritious food for "lower income groups" will be addressed by the current administration, if only because no government seems willing or able to tackle ever-increasing fuel prices.

The price of oil will continue its upward trend, dragging the costs of fertilisers, pesticides, tractor fuel, transportation, refrigeration and packaging with it. Climate change will continue to wreak havoc with weather systems, bringing drought and floods in its wake. We haven't yet seen food riots in the developed world, but we have seen scarcity and rocketing prices. And things will get worse over the next decade as global food prices rise by a predicted 40 percent in real terms (16).

Would it work?

It may not be too alarmist to imagine hunger and malnutrition re-emerging within Britain, at least among the already deprived poor. If we are to avoid the return of soup kitchens and food queues to our streets, we may need to invoke the spirit of the war-time 'Dig for Victory' campaign in the UK - the most successful example of urban agriculture in modern history.

While there is a groundswell of urban agriculture in our towns and cities, with many health authorities actively promoting the virtues of fresh food, we have a way to go before we can compare with the US, where city authorities in Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco, New York, Detroit, and Cleveland actively support this form of food production.

This year, for example, is Seattle's 'Year of Urban Agriculture' and the council has introduced a number of important changes to zoning laws, including the introduction of an ordinance to update Seattle's planning laws allowing "urban farms" and "community gardens" to be developed in all zones, lifting restrictions on farmers' markets, removing prohibitions on rooftop greenhouses for food growing, and giving residents the right to sell food grown on their own property (17).

Similar regulatory changes could encourage the development and commercialisation of urban agriculture in the UK. At present, UK bye-laws, and planning and building regulations, frequently present obstacles to urban agriculture schemes consigning them to small plots and hobby gardens. The obstacles range from a common prohibition on selling the products of allotments to zoning laws fixing land use, even when the land is actually unused. While Government is committed to securing ever-lengthening supply chains, few local councils in the UK seem to be willing to devalue their holdings by freeing urban building land for other purposes.

Some groups appear to have given up on the authorities and promote the subversive tactic of 'guerrilla planting', surreptitiously seeding and cultivating food plants on road verges or in public parks. But that may not be exactly what it seems.

The highest profile example in the UK, Incredible Edibles Todmorden (IET), was launched by Pam Warhurst and Mary Clear in 2008 when, according to legend, they planted illegal rhubarb, moving rapidly on to guerrilla herb gardens, orchards and vegetable plots all over the old mill town of Todmorden on the Lancashire/West Yorkshire border. Now, the idea has spread beyond the Pennines and IET itself has won the approval of Calderdale Council. It plans, somewhat unbelievably, for Todmorden to become self-sufficient in food by 2018.

This is undoubtedly inspirational, but it's also a little disingenuous. IET's founders were not just ordinary citizens on a mission: Clear was, and still is, employed by Calderdale Council as a community development officer, while Warhurst is a former leader of Calderdale Council, Deputy Chair and Acting Chair of the Countryside Agency, board member of Yorkshire Forward, member of the board of Natural England, and Chair of the National Countryside Access Forum and the local NHS Trust. She is also the Chair of the local regeneration company, Pennine Prospects, and – since January this year – the Chair of the Forestry Commission.

Within weeks of IET's first planting, the group had a constitution and Calderdale Council had issued a series of pro-forma licences covering plots of land, community orchards and containers within "designated community growing spaces" (18). It's not what you know, as the motto goes, it's who.

Economics and realpolitik

IET's romantic image is clearly grafted onto solid political root-stock, but in big cities political realities are often less tractable than in small towns. More to the point, free food and volunteer labour may stimulate enthusiasm and encourage people to eat fresher food, but they do not address the need for large scale production to find reliable labour to supervise, manage and work land, and to collect, distribute and process its produce.

As an alternative to existing food systems - at least at city scale - sustainable urban agriculture needs to be a mainstream economic activity, helping to alleviate extreme deprivation not just by addressing food poverty and poor nutrition but by providing sustainable employment and opportunities for the development of enterprises along the supply chain.

This doesn't mean that volunteering and individual activities are irrelevant. After all, individual or community allotments – restricted and in short supply as they are – currently account for by far the majority of the land devoted to some form of urban agriculture in the UK. But mainstreaming does mean that local authorities need to facilitate, initiate and co-ordinate urban agriculture activities in their areas in order to help create the formal structures and food systems that will support revenue generation. The instruments and examples are there, it just needs the political will to inspire and motivate.

With unavoidable rising food prices and a growing demand for fresh, local produce, urban agriculture can make money. As a matter of fact, a recent blog on an OECD website quotes "researchers in Ohio" who estimate that with the right crops and growing techniques, "urban farmers can gross $90,000 per acre" (19). It's not altogether ridiculous, although it would probably mean growing two or three crops of strawberries a year using intensive farming techniques, which may be entirely against the spirit of most urban agriculture's enthusiasts.

But it should give pause for thought. The supply of agricultural produce can provide opportunities for the development of enterprises to add value along the supply chain (for example, by washing and bagging salad). And the success of local businesses based on the production, processing and supply of food can create a multiplier effect, lifting the income of the communities concerned; this can produce a virtuous circle of development helping to achieve sustainable growth.

For poor communities, using their own labour and relatively cheap materials, the biggest difficulty is achieving access to urban agriculture's primary resource – unused or under-used land. The land is there (up to 30 percent of the territory of our cities) and most of it is within or close to communities. Much of it could be cultivated, or house chickens or pigs or bees. But the problem is making it available.

Where land is within a community and owned by a local authority, it could be transferred at relatively low cost to the community itself - permanently through the provisions of the community asset transfer programme established by the Quirk Review (20), or temporarily under the terms of so-called 'meanwhile' agreements (these are currently intended to support the temporary occupation of empty city centre property by non-commercial tenants).

Unfortunately, community asset transfer – like many previous attempts at community regeneration – seems to have fallen foul of many of the same problems. It disproportionately benefits the richer and better educated members of communities and seems to focus on the erection or restoration of buildings, at great expense, to be turned into arts centres, sports centres or plain old community centres. These should not be lightly dismissed, but they focus on communities as consumers not producers.
The poorest estates in our cities are filled with people whose rights to consume and produce are severely curtailed or compromised. Urban agriculture offers them an alternative, and some hope for everyone.

About the author

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