

Financing City Farms in London

City farms as a form of urban agriculture is a recent but increasingly important urban phenomenon in the United Kingdom. The future of urban agriculture lies in the ability to adapt and mainstream it into prevailing development themes such as education, community cohesion, social inclusion and biodiversity.

An explicit definition of urban agriculture in the UK is hard to come by although writers appear to equate it to the use of urban sites primarily for cultivation and food production. Howe (2001) reminds us that such food production in cities is practised in back gardens, window boxes, community gardens, greenhouses, urban farms and allotments. In practice, urban agriculture in the UK is associated with any activities that promote food growing and enhance Agenda 21 (Iles, 2001).

City farms play an increasing role in the urban sustainable agenda

This reference to sustainability and agenda 21 broadens the definition of urban agriculture from mere concerns for food production and livestock rearing to any use of urban space in ways that:

- ❖ contribute to social inclusion;
- ❖ contribute to biodiversity;

Greenwich in London



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Young and old volunteers working on the pond

Woodlands Farm Trust

- ❖ promote environmental, plant and animal education; and
- ❖ contribute to urban regeneration, health, recycling and innovation.

Garnett (1996) provided what remains the most prevalent typology of urban agriculture sites in the UK, namely: that it occurs on allotments, urban/city farms, community gardens and orchards, local authority and tenanted farms, gardens and yards, school grounds and prison grounds. In terms of numbers of units and of people involved, allotments are the most prevalent, the most visible and well-documented form of urban agriculture in the UK. Iles (2001) estimates that there are some 65 city farms, 1,200 community gardens, about 70 school farms and over 300,000 allotment plots in the country.

Allotments are small pieces of land largely owned by and rented from local authorities throughout the UK. The majority of the allotments is owned by the local authority (Bradford 100%, Leeds 90%) with the remainder in private or community ownership (Howe and Wheeler, 1999: 17). This local authority dominance is a country-wide pattern. However, local authorities only provide the infrastructure such as fencing, road access and water points. Resources for the actual agricultural activities are largely the responsibility of

each individual gardener, allotment renter or a group of these. Only non-commercial urban agriculture is permitted on allotments. Vegetables and fruit are the main products from allotment gardens.

Compared to allotments, city farms have a recent history in the UK, are a less documented and a less visible feature of the urban landscape, but are slowly playing an increasing role in the urban sustainable agenda. Most of the city farms were set up by groups of enthusiasts on formally derelict land or waste ground. An estimated 3 million people per year are involved in city farms alone (Iles, 2001). Their emerging significance is not so much in terms of food production but in their role as community resource for social inclusion, biodiversity, environmental education and heritage (Howe, 2001; FCFCG, 2002). They have been selected for documentation in order to highlight the different perceptions that urban agriculture can embrace as well as to fill a gap in the UK's urban agriculture literature that is currently synonymous with allotment gardens.

LONDON CITY FARMS

London has about 17 city farms, only three of which are fully local authority owned and managed¹. Except for these three, the rest are run by independent charitable trusts that are community led and managed by a management com-

mittee. Whereas allotments have a history of over 300 years, none of the city farms in London is over thirty years old. Their umbrella organisation, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG) was set up in 1980 and the London office was only recently established in 2000 with meagre resources for two part-time members of staff and office support (FCFCG, 2002: 5).

As highlighted in the last row of Table 1, the direct contribution of government and local authorities to city farm resources is low. Figure 1 depicts the sources of resources for Woodlands Farm in 2001, indicating that there was no grant from the local authority. The major component of resources required for farm operations comes from charities, private donations and locally generated revenues. Also very significant is the role of regular volunteers on these farms whose contribution reduces the employment budget very considerably. The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG, 2002) estimates that there are over 1,000 regular volunteers per year on London city farms. Through volunteering, partnerships and in-kind donations, high value inputs are given that would normally be unaffordable by the city farms.

SUSTAINABILITY OF FUNDING SOURCES

The future of lottery funding

Farms receive significant funding from the Lottery Fund for both capital investment and running costs. Bids for these

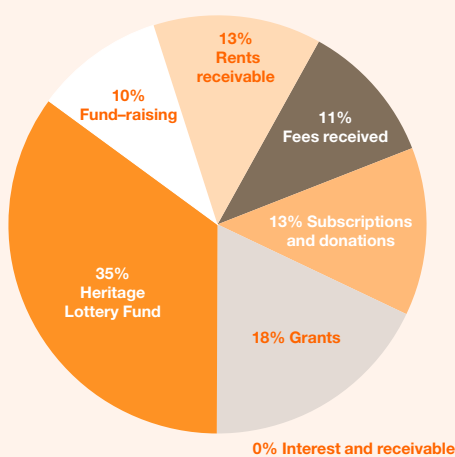


Figure 1 Typical sources of income for year 2001: Woodlands Farm

funds are made to the Community Fund, The Heritage Lottery Fund and the New Opportunities Fund. The farms have to compete against many other project bids from all over the country. In the 2002-2007 period, The Community Fund gave its priorities as children, young people, black and ethnic minority groups, refugee and asylum seekers, older people and people in areas disadvantaged by social and economic change. This is the framework in which farms like Vauxhall Farm secured funds for its project for refugees and asylum seekers. However, funds from these public sources are not very secure and allocations are dependent on prevailing political opinions and pressures brought to bear on the Fund Managers. To reduce social friction and enhance continued support, community

groups should put an emphasis on how their projects promote existing development policy. In the case of the UK, the farms have to “speak the language of” old people, children, education, social inclusion and the disadvantaged.

Competitive bidding

Many of the city farms in London are under-resourced and would close down if grants from charities were to disappear (FCFCG, 2002). However, even these grants are accessed through competitive bidding using problematic criteria that favour high profile and high return schemes (Howe, 2001). They favour highly organised groups with the skills and knowledge base to produce good bids. In contrast, small community groups wanting to set up community gardens or to

Table 1: Diversity of London City Farms - Two Examples

Variable/Feature	Woodlands Farm	Vauxhall City Farm
Size	About 90 (ninety acres)	About 1 (one) acre
Location	Outer London, London Borough of Greenwich (on border with London Borough of Bexley)	Inner London, London Borough of Lambeth
Poverty Levels	One of the deprived areas in London (and the UK)	One of the poorest outer London Boroughs
Management Structure	Registered Charity and Company Limited By Guarantee	Registered Charity and Company Limited by Guarantee
Turnover	About £160,000	£140,000
Staff	Volunteer management committee, one full-time officer, several task committees and volunteers	12-member management committee; four full-time staff, two part-time staff and 26 volunteers
Activities	Offers wildlife, environmental sanctuaries, and educational, training and social opportunities to a variety of individuals and groups in the community	Offers educational, training, social and recreational opportunities to a variety of groups and individuals in the urban communities Work Placements are offered annually in association with colleges such as Bromely College - the trainees get National Vocational Qualification Certificates in animal care (Level 1) that enable them to get employed full-time elsewhere
Source of Funds	20% LA and the rest from donations, charities and private sector. At least £100,000 for annual running costs.	30% LA, 40% Trusts and Charities, 10% other. At least £65,000 for annual running costs.

improve their local allotments will not find this easy. In the UK, community groups should consider pulling their resources together, especially where they are pursuing related or common project themes and combine forces to prepare bids for submission to key funding organisations. Community groups should also consider more sharing of skills in fund-raising.

Environmental health, safety and built development threats

As in cities of the developing world, urban agriculture in London faces challenges and constraints with access to land being the most critical. Other challenges have to do with infrastructure, soil contamination, theft, vandalism, access to inputs and marketing of produce. Public health and safety concerns regarding these farms were heightened during the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2000-2001. Although no cases of the disease were reported on any London city farms, the farms had to be closed to the public for a long time (FCFCG, 2002). Since then, the public remains wary about working with farms. For farms that keep livestock, there is increasing opposition from animal rights campaigners and rising insurance costs. Thus, to survive, urban agriculture and city farm projects have to continue to maintain high health and safety standards as well as publicity campaigns to reassure the public. Joint project campaigns would be a more cost-effective way to deal with these issues.

Security of tenure

Given that in the UK start-up costs of these farms are in excess of £150,000 while minimum annual running costs are at least £50,000, any projects will need significant support from government or local authorities. Existing farms are struggling to raise the required funds and therefore, before any new farms can be contemplated, there

is a need to strengthen the financial and management capacity of those that exist. Clearly, the tenure security of the city farms is of concern and it needs to be guaranteed by the government through government grants, or where this is not immediately possible, for the local authorities to guarantee a long-term lease to the sites. It is with this security that members of the community and business can invest their efforts into the projects.

Community groups should consider pulling their resources together

Resources and matching up

Resources for urban agriculture project activities do not necessarily have to be in the form of money. They can be in other forms of materials, services and expertise. Companies are a good source of support. Most would like to show that they care about community needs and are not "rogue capitalists". Most company workers are ordinary family people who understand the need to survive and if approached appropriately will be happy to offer community funding as a way to advertise their businesses.

Education and training

Urban agriculture is not just about food production. In cities, environmental, educational and recreational dimensions are very important and can be a major source of income. Despite the varied origins of the farms (in some cases they are explicit sustainable Agenda 21 projects), the emerging trend is that educational activities are now the dominant feature. However, the potentials in this sector are far from exhausted. The levels of utilisation and direct involvement of schools could be much higher, like regular lessons,

or after-school activities especially in the summer. Following the Johannesburg Earth Summit in 2002, where education was put forward as one of the priority development sectors, community groups need to integrate this aspect into their projects and to articulate it clearly when seeking support from both government and international development organisations.

Community motivation and volunteering

Sustainable development is about community empowerment and capacity-building. City farms should be seen as multi-functional spaces where a variety of inter-linked community-driven projects take place. This enables expansion of activities with minimal manpower and financial costs to the farms. Since ownership of assets is crucial, the groups should be given opportunities to own the land on which they operate. This is also critical for communities in developing countries where communities continue to lose their land resource assets. Volunteers contribute significantly to these community projects and this has to be encouraged in all contexts.

Income-generating activities

Although city farms in the UK cannot legally operate commercially, any income they generate from sales and services has to be ploughed back into project activities. Currently, income from this source remains below 5%. Potentials for further income-raising opportunities need to be tapped but mindful of the need not to reduce access by the poor.

Notes

- 1) The three local authority owned city farms in London are Newham City Farm, Hounslow Urban Farm and Brookes Farm in the London Borough of Waltham Forest.



Woodlands Farm Trust

Members of Woodlands Farm Trust at work

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