

# Science for Environment Policy

## Urban agriculture: why 'one size fits all' approaches don't work

**Global interest in urban agriculture is growing.** However, the importance of local context is not reflected in current governance approaches, argues a new study which evaluated urban agriculture in Belgium and Poland. The authors say that considering city-specific factors can help urban agriculture achieve its full potential, and recommend a broader policymaking strategy that considers the benefits beyond food production.

**Urban agriculture — the practice of growing food in a village, town or city — has a long history.** Recently, urban agriculture has experienced a resurgence, driven in part by challenges to food security, urban sustainability and the economy, and is now practised by an estimated 800 million people<sup>1</sup> — many of whom live in the Global South, where urban agriculture has been practised since the birth of cities.

However, according to the authors of the new study, recent discourse on urban agriculture is overwhelmingly positive, uncritical, and fails to place urban agriculture in context. The result of assuming that urban agriculture is inherently valuable is an 'instrumental approach' to government — in which the development of urban agriculture policies and projects take precedent over the nature, objectives and impacts of these initiatives, say the researchers.

Policy also tends to place urban agriculture in the area of food and agriculture, focusing on preservation of farmland and supply of food above other benefits, such as provision of green space, managing stormwater, improving food literacy, social benefits, and improving public health through consumption of fruit and vegetables. This singular approach threatens the diversity of urban agriculture, especially if the resources have to come from the policy area of agriculture alone, say the researchers.

Without seeking to discredit other research that focuses on the development of urban agriculture policies and other support for urban agriculture, this European-funded study<sup>2</sup> critically reviewed the current view on urban agriculture, arguing that a more nuanced approach to governance is needed.

To back up their argument, the researchers used two city case studies, chosen for their different backgrounds (based, respectively, in social democratic and communist pasts) and differences in urban layout, political climate and public attitudes towards use of urban space: Ghent, Belgium and Warsaw, Poland.

Remarkably, urban agriculture is characterised by similar practices and advocated by similar stakeholders in both cities. However, developments look very different — which suggests that urban agriculture does not have a universal meaning (as the current narrative suggests), but depends on specific circumstances.

The researchers analysed the cases using interviews with key stakeholders from municipal government (e.g. policymakers), social and cultural institutions (e.g. NGOs, social workers), entrepreneurs (e.g. farmers, restaurants), as well as academics and 'pioneers' (students and volunteers). They questioned interviewees about their perspectives on and involvement in urban agriculture developments; perspectives on the network of urban agriculture stakeholders in their city; understanding of factors that enable and constrain urban agriculture developments; and their views on the future of urban agriculture in their city. Data was collected during spring 2013 and 2014 in Ghent, and spring 2014 in Warsaw.

*Continued on next page.*



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The authors describe some of the major differences between the two cities. They say urban agriculture in Warsaw is characterised by isolated, short-term projects, while in Ghent projects are better established. Ghent also has a growing and positive public dialogue on urban agriculture, while initiatives in Warsaw receive little support and are poorly recognised by both the public and government.

To explain these differences, the researchers analysed context-specific factors — grouped into categories of 'urban layout', 'political climate' and 'public perceptions and attitudes towards use of urban space'.

In Warsaw, they found that society overall does not have a positive attitude towards urban food production. They also found that governments prioritise economic development, while aims for urban agriculture have been set aside. As a result, enthusiasm for urban agriculture has become subversive and lacks legitimacy, despite Warsaw having plenty of green space and a high number of community gardens.

In contrast, Ghent has much broader advocacy for urban agriculture, but little green space. Here, the development of a local food system is included in the political agenda on sustainability. This, combined with citizens' receptiveness towards urban food innovations, makes urban agriculture increasingly popular in the city. However, space is tight, and initiatives that are successful generally use temporary spaces or are incorporated into existing organisations, where initiatives can be set up with limited investment.

As this article shows, each case has specific opportunities and barriers. In Warsaw, for example, urban agriculture is marginalised because it functions separately to existing food production activities, such as community gardens; while in Ghent, lack of space and investment could dampen enthusiasm for urban agriculture. It is important that strategies for urban agriculture are developed based on these differences.

As well as considering context-specific factors, the researchers say that urban agriculture should be considered in policy sectors beyond food and agriculture, for instance, in social, political, economic and cultural structures. They say such an approach could enable policymakers to make the most of the opportunities for urban agriculture and maximise societal value under specific local circumstances. These findings are broadly applicable, as cities everywhere are under pressure to participate in sustainable development.

