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## Urban agriculture and “early birds” initiatives in Warsaw

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**Abstract:** The article concerns the application of the idea of urban agriculture in Poland. The concept has not yet been widely recognized in Poland, that is why the emerging practitioners and their initiatives can thus very well be named as ‘early birds’. To capture general views on UA, similarities and differences in opinions and to formulate possibilities for UA in Warsaw we organized a workshop with representatives of main UA organizations in the Polish capital as well as representatives of the City Hall. The workshop tasks reflect different topics as: identification of UA, aims of UA, location of UA, the future of UA, opportunities and barriers for UA development, and the role of local authorities in UA development. To conclude, the UA activities represent in Warsaw promote mostly the social and ecological aspects with the role of UA in the protection of open green space in the city. Professional production in the city linked to job creation is currently not seen as of great importance. The most UA forms in Warsaw are related to allotment gardens and agricultural holdings.

**Key words:** urban agriculture, open green space, Warsaw, workshop

### Urban agriculture in Poland from a European perspective

Urbanization and issues related to urbanization processes are high upon on the political agenda. As such, policy makers, entrepreneurs, citizens and academics shift their focus toward promising strategies in securing ecological and material well-being of its citizens (Lin et al., 2015). A case in point is urban agriculture (UA) which has been enthusiastically promoted as one such strategy in many Western cities. The attractiveness of UA is explained by its potential response to multiple urban issues, such as the need for greenery, improving food knowledge and related health issues, connection with the rural hinterland and farmers, inclusion of migrant populations or isolated groups, social interaction, neighborhood participation and a more local, democratic, inclusive and transparent food system (see Armar-Klemesu, 1999; Draper and Freedman, 2010; Feenstra et al., 1999; Hodgson et al., 2011; Howe et al., 2005; Nugent, 2000; Smit and Bailkey, 2006; van Veenhuizen, 2006).

Even though food production activities in and around urban centers is not a novel practice, the idea of UA has generated a stream of additional practices together with a range of (social and technological) experiments. Urban agriculture covers many different forms and arguably includes initiatives ranging from allotment or community gardens to educational farming, rooftop farms and other high-tech experiments. This broad perspective is in alignment with the inclusive definition of Mougeot (2005) who



defines that urban agriculture is “located within (intra-urban) or on the fringe (peri-urban) of a town, a city or a metropolis, and grows or raises, processes and distributes a diversity of food and non-food products, (re-)uses largely human and material resources, products and services found in and around that urban area, and in turn supplies human and material resources, products and services largely to that urban area”. From such a broad perspective, we ensure that potential emerging forms of urban food production – whether it be very small or on the outskirts of the city - to deal with urban issues are included in the analysis. It should be added that in the case of Warsaw, if allotment gardens and professional farming around the city of Warsaw are included in the conversation on UA, that they have been well-established and culturally grounded in the city. In other words, while it can be considered as UA, they in fact have not changed much in their practices and meaning over the years.

Despite the observation that UA is spreading rapidly across the European continent, the idea of it has not yet been widely recognized in Poland. In addition, even with our wider scope on UA, new initiatives in practice, based on the idea of urban agriculture are not easily found. The emerging practitioners and their initiatives can thus very well be labeled as pioneers or ‘early birds’. So far, it has mainly caught the attention of academics and researchers. As such, they can be considered ‘pioneers’. Publications in academic journals have increased in numbers the past years, but they mainly refer to examples from abroad. Some examples are Giecewicz (2005) who writes about farming a factor for natural revitalization in the city of Vienna, Austria; Palej (2010) who describes several foreign examples very concisely to illustrate the opportunities UA offers to improve the natural environment of the city, as well as a strategy to support sustainable development of a city; and Heczko-Hylowa (2013) who discusses development of UA in French metropolitan areas.

Popular and more accessible information on UA can be found in various sources on the internet – mostly in Polish. Again, they mostly refer to foreign examples: Dekoeko (2012) presents ‘Edible Park’ in Den Hague and ‘Prinzessinnengarten’ in Berlin; Ekologia.pl (2012) describes examples of roof farming; Szczepańska (2013) presents UA in the city of Barcelona; Zenkteler (2013) discusses UA in Havana, Cuba; and Wybieralski (2013) and Radziejewicz (2013) mention UA in Detroit, U.S.A. In addition, there are a few well-known figures in the city that organize public events such as food foraging, food preservation, guerilla gardening. Together, the internet sources and actual events point at the start of a public conversation and spreading of information on a larger scale.

Data in this analysis mainly come from two different data gathering periods and methods. The first one is the Short Term Scientific Mission in Warsaw, provided by COST–Action TD1106 Urban Agriculture Europe, organized by Barbara Szulczewska (Warsaw University of Life Sciences) and conducted by Charlotte Prové. The research was conducted between February and March 2014. The exploration of UA in Warsaw revealed a series of emerging grass-root activities promoting the idea of UA among Warsaw citizens, the strategies employed, their mission and the opportunities and barriers experienced. It also pointed at the major role allotment gardens are still playing in the context of Warsaw. Simultaneously, there is still a large acreage of farmland and a large number of farmers surrounding the urban center of Warsaw. The STSM report concluded that both of these aspect could be contributing to the fact that UA is not recognized as a pressing issue since, on the one hand, professional farming is still visible and on the other hand, food production in the urban core is still culturally rooted in the allotment gardens (even if their significance for food production has been decreasing for generations).

As a consequence of the limited enthusiasm and restricted scope for UA to date, it can be expected that the present advocacy for UA will define to a great extent the eventual form and content of UA in the near future. As such, it is of great importance to know about actions, the views, and believes of UA practitioners, which are here called the “early birds”. Equally important is to grasp the views, believes and (non)actions of the relevant stakeholders such as urban planners, policy makers, etc. who are now not part of UA in Warsaw, but could somehow play a role.



In order to gain insight into Warsaw’s UA “early birds” opinions and visions on possibilities and constrains of UA development we have organized a workshop with representatives of several UA organizations. We have also invited representatives of the City Hall, more specifically, from the Architecture and Spatial Planning Office and the Environmental Protection Office. The aim of the workshop was to capture general views on UA, similarities and differences in opinions and to formulate possibilities for UA development in Warsaw collectively. The novel aspect of this workshop is that for the first time, relevant stakeholders have sat around the same table, and identifying UA as a topic in its own right.

## **Assumptions and organization of the Workshop**

The workshop took place on December 9, 2014 at the Department of Landscape Architecture, Warsaw University of Life Sciences. In addition to representatives of organizations involved in UA promotion in Warsaw, representatives of the City Hall also participated in the workshop. Representatives of the Architecture and Spatial Planning Office and Environmental Protection Office were invited in order to provide information and explanations on the current policies and legal regulations of the City Hall. It should be stated that there are no policies on UA and that spatial policies are very strict. The unawareness of UA as an idea within the City Hall in general was an additional motivation to have them participate in the workshop.

In total, 12 participants contributed to the workshop of which 6 can be considered “early birds” organizations and 5 the ‘representatives of the City Hall’. The present organizations, their aims/goals and scope of activities are listed in table 1. Every organization –except for one which is an ecologically oriented organization- did not start before the year 2011. This is again an indication of the novel idea of UA in Warsaw. All of the organizations are rather small in number of people who are actively engaged. The number varies from 2 to 30 people and most of the members are operating on the local scale. Participants occupy various professions: landscape architect (5), architect (6), cultural anthropologist (1), geologist (1), ICT (1), political scientist (1), dietician (1), environmental manager (1). Participants of the City Hall represented the following professions: natural scientists, landscape architects and architects. It should be noted that there were no gardeners (from the traditional allotment gardens) or (professional) farmers among the participants. However, this should not be surprising as the STSM concluded that farmers are missing stakeholders in the conversation on UA in Warsaw.

The workshop started with an introduction of goals and expectations. In a next step, the group was divided into 5 teams to facilitate discussion among the participants. Each team consisted of “early birds” as well as the representatives of the City Hall. There were two assignments. The first was related to points as: aims, forms, places and constraints. The second assignment was related to present activities in Warsaw and composed of multiple questions which could be summarized as the what, who, how, and why of UA. For each question, an envelope with a set of cards (both with pictures as well as blank cards) was developed. Participants had to choose between the cards which matched their opinion best or could add another one if they needed it. This way we avoided confusion of conceptual definitions and were able to concentrate on the discussion on the associated features of UA.

## **Workshop results**

The purpose of this section is to outline how the participants perceive UA (if they do). A key objective is to provide insight into the aims associated with UA, the appropriate form of UA and the possibilities and constraints they identify for the future. The section discusses the different topics in the following order: identification of UA, aims of UA, location of UA, the future of UA, opportunities and barriers for UA development, and the role of local authorities in UA development.

Table 1. Organizations attending the workshop

Nr	Organization name and year of foundation	Goals	Place of activity	Performed forms of UA	Number of active members	Catchment
1	Pracownia Mech Moss laboratory (2012 informally; 2014 formally)	Design according to sustainable development principles	No limits; head-quarter – Warsaw	UA as integral part of projects in different scales	2 persons	No limits
2	Pszczelarium Apiary (2013)	Services for developing beekeeping; information, education and promotion	Warsaw and Mazovia Voivodship	Putting beehives in parks and building roofs	2 persons who are the members of the organization, 10 persons involved in aims implementation	About 2.500 persons declaring interest on Facebook; several hundred taking part in workshops
3	Kolorowy Widelec - Colorful Fork (2014)	Healthy food for children; food education; fruits and vegetables cultivation in different places	Warsaw, Mazovia and Lodz Voivodship	Selected school and nursery gardens; promoting fruits and vegetables cultivation in family gardens	12 persons	Potentially all interested in schools and nurseries in Warsaw and both voivodships
4	Warszawski Oddział Ośrodka Działań Ekologicznych "Źródła" w Łodzi, Warsaw Branch of Ecological Activities Center "Sources" in Lodz (1997)	Ecological education, particularly for children	Warsaw	Own plot in allotment garden	No data	No data
5	Wspólny Ogród Common garden (2014)	Creation of educational and social garden	Warsaw, Sluzewski Cultural Center	Ecological UA	Over a dozen up to 30 persons	Local; Sluzew up the Valley Neighborhood
6	Pixxe - Jodie Baltazar (2011)	In the beginning – transformation of abandoned land into a food garden; now – food cultivation, education on organic food cultivation in cities, composting	Warsaw, Ochota – Rakowiec District	"Open plot" in allotment garden; gardens on abandoned land, local composting, community gardens; school gardens	1 – 4 persons	10 – 50 persons

### **Identification of UA, identified by workshop participants (not necessarily in Warsaw)**

The following forms of UA were mentioned on the cards by the workshop participants (see figure 1): allotment gardens, school and nursery gardens, farms (existing agricultural areas within the cities), home gardens, community gardens, gardens in public parks, roof gardens, apiary on roofs,



big suburban farms, small suburban farms, educational farms, nurseries, horticulture centers, guerilla gardening, balconies, containers.

The most popular were allotment gardens, rooftop gardens and school and nursery gardens. Other forms were rarely indicated. This can be explained by the longstanding tradition of Warsaw to provide allotment gardens. The intense involvement of citizens and their visibility entail that these allotment gardens are strongly associated with UA. The low association of other forms of UA could be related to the fact that they are either not recognized or visible in the city or that they simply do not exist yet. Important to note however, is that allotment gardens are considered by the participants as a form of urban agriculture, which is often a point of discussion.

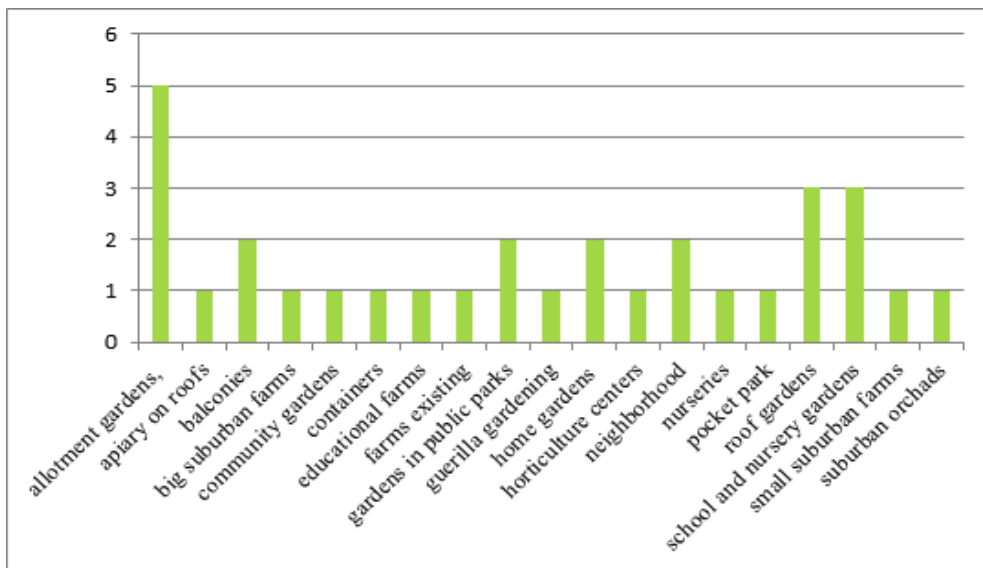


Fig. 1 Familiar forms of urban agriculture identified by workshop participants.

## Aims of UA

Workshop participants indicated as the principal aim of UA development in Warsaw: green, open space protection (3 organizations). One said production of fresh fruits and vegetables and another believed that education was most important. Additional purposes mentioned prove difficult to summarize because their combination varied from team to team. Nevertheless, education, social integration and physical activity ranked high for most of the participants. Job creation was indicated as one of the last. It should be added that one team added their own proposal of the UA goal – it was happiness of inhabitants.

These results, however, are preliminary and should in fact be linked to the professional background of the participants. The professional background of the (relatively high number of) landscape architects and architects among the workshop participants together with the City Hall representatives, are most likely the main explaining factor for the general view that green open spaces protection should be considered as the main goal of UA in the city. Production of fresh fruits and vegetables was also cited, probably due to the presence of representatives of the Colorful Fork (which is an organization oriented to healthy nutrition and education through fruit and vegetable cultivation). This, however, was not linked to job creation. That goal has been considered as the least important by almost all the five teams. Despite the fact that goals such as: education, social integration and physical activity ranked high, it is



remarkable that the Warsaw “early birds stressed the importance of UA for the city’s spatial structure creation and social development. Again, this might be more related to the professional or educational background of the participant.

Economic aspects of UA was not taken into consideration and raised as a goal/ discussion topic, probably due to the lack of professional gardeners and farmers among workshop participants. Yet, again, these results are likely explained by the fact that there are currently mainly sociologists and architects involved in the UA movement, and only few people with a professional farming background. These results also suggest that the view of UA as a non-professional business allows community gardening to be adopted as an identifiable form of UA.

### **Location of UA activity**

Even though the STSM results revealed a strong perceived discourse among Polish that food production is not appropriate in city centers, the participants defined UA development as appropriate over the whole surface of the city. This could be interpreted as the dominant view of the workshop participants. Two teams were more specific according to the type of UA activity: big farms (holdings) should be located at the city outskirts, allotment gardens should be located all over the city surface, private gardens, schools gardens, vacant space “gardens” are better fit for neighborhoods; and rooftop gardens, terraces, neighborhood gardens, local parks, and vertical gardens should be developed in the city center.

The agreement that UA activities are appropriate all over the city should be interpreted as a consequence of the choice of its main aims as well as its preferred forms: allotment gardens, private gardens, schools gardens, vacant space “gardens”, gardens in neighborhoods and local parks, roofs gardens, terraces, vertical gardens. These forms preferably involve a lot of people and have many social aspects. Their proximity to the citizens is thus an important aspect of their core functioning. All these forms were enumerated by the workshop participants as well-known, however, not necessarily typical for Warsaw’s current situation. They were also expected to be implemented in the future.

### **UA in the future**

#### • Expected forms of UA

Participants predict a higher variety in the types of UA in the future. (fig. 2). They do not only imagine very straightforward, “realistic” types, but also show acceptance for many novel, innovative (for the city of Warsaw) ideas. These results show that participants are optimistic about the future of UA in Warsaw.

#### • UA actors

The workshop participants were asked to indicate main actors of UA involved in the activity now and in the future. For almost every team, “seniors” was the first choice for the current situation. With seniors we understand elderly, retired persons. They mentioned also professional gardeners, families, friends and neighbors as actors who were involved in practicing UA, but only to a limited extent. In the future, it is expected that the prevailing group of actors would change. According to different participants, instead of seniors, families, young people and neighbors would take the leading role in UA. Seniors were still mentioned, but only as a second or third choice. This means that participants expect that the intense involvement of seniors in current allotment gardens will over time be replaced by a newer, younger generation with more innovative ideas for urban food production. Overall, it is remarkable that a great importance is attributed to stakeholders with mainly possessing lay knowledge of farming practices (and thus no professional farming knowledge). From this it can be deduced that UA activities are strongly associated with social activities.



## Urban agriculture and “early birds” ...

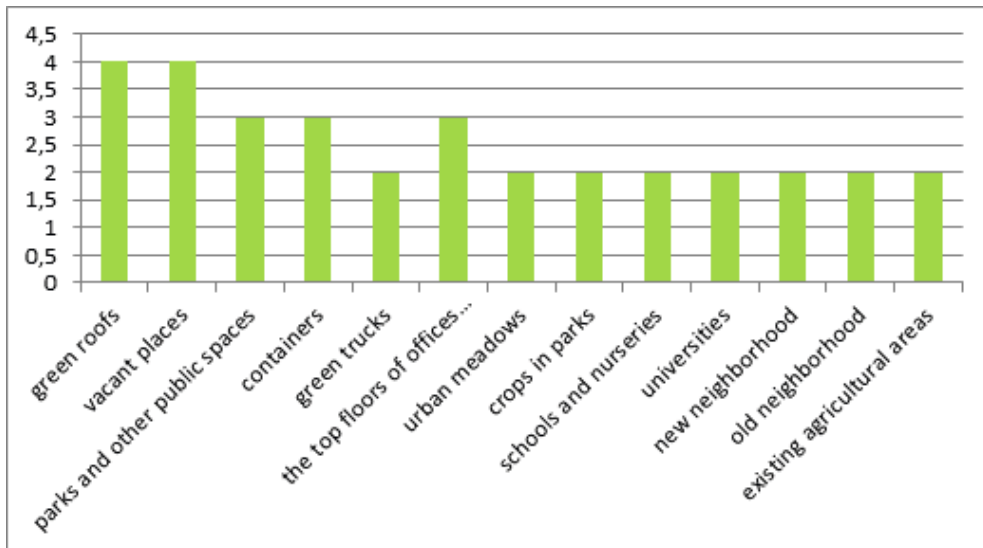


Fig. 2 Forms of urban agriculture identified by workshop participants

### • Desirable crops and livestock

The workshop participants mostly agreed on the types of crops suitable for urban production. They mentioned a wide selection of crops such as: fruit trees, flowers, vegetables, herbs, ornamental plants and annual crops. It is surprising that inedible produce like flowers and ornamental plants are also valued. In addition, they also underscored the necessity of ecological farming principles.

Crops indicated by workshop participants as desirable in the city might be recognized as representative for the forms of UA selected by them.

Bees (mostly on roofs) and chicken (mostly in private gardens) were the most frequently cited type of livestock for urban areas. Particularly bees seemed to be very popular. This may on the one hand be due to well-known rooftop projects in the past and on the other hand, to the general awareness of threats of bee population extinction in Poland. Sheep, pigs, rabbits and ducks were seen as proper for educational farms only. One team decided that urban areas are not suitable for livestock at all. This result may be related to the fact that animal keeping in Warsaw is very restricted by law. Compared to crop production then, it appears that animal keeping in the city center is received with less enthusiasm and is evaluated as a bit more controversial.

### **Opportunities and constraints for UA development**

Regardless of the optimistic future for UA in Warsaw, to date the existing allotment gardens and agricultural areas within the city are still considered as the main opportunities for UA development. There was no consensus on the main constraint between all the teams. Views were rather divided. The constraints that were identified were lack of knowledge, social indifference, the belief that there are no benefits to developing UA, the cumbersome attitude of local authorities and urban planners due to enforced regulation which is unfortunate for protection of agricultural land and open space. For three teams, the attitude of land owners is problematic as they are interested in changing land designation for selling; because land for construction is more expensive than agricultural land. These trends are pushed further by developers pressure. One of those three also indicated fear that the food will be polluted and another bureaucracy. Even though the threat of loss of potential UA spaces is



recognized, when compared to UA constraints in other cities, it is remarkable that lack of land or space is not mentioned as one of the main constraints. This can be explained by the visibility of the allotment gardens all over the city and the plots of agricultural land that are often unused currently, because their shape makes it unattractive for farming. Another explanation might be that the first and foremost barrier to UA is to get people accepting of the idea.

### ***The role of local authorities in UA development***

Dissemination, promotion and supporting of bottom-up initiatives were the most frequently indicated roles for local authorities. Only one group saw the necessity of the development of UA policy or spatial regulation which would ensure the legitimacy of UA activities. This, however, was considered as rather impossible because of the lack of political will to introduce UA as one of the development policy goal. Due to the present situation and official policy of the City Hall, most of the workshop participants did not expect much support for UA development – or better, for their activity – from the local authorities. They would be satisfied if local authorities helped them in the dissemination and promotion of the UA idea and supported (financially) bottom-up initiatives.

## **Discussion**

The results of the STSM, together with the outcomes of the workshop have provided much insight into UA in the context of Warsaw. The STSM concluded that there are several different stakeholders, in their own way, involved in UA in Warsaw, but that they are not or only loosely connected to each other. It also added that the local government as a potential strong partner in the development of UA was missing. The novel aspect of the workshop then, was that we have managed for the first time to get two different groups of stakeholders -with different interests- around the same table. Both grassroots practitioners –or the early birds- that put urban agriculture into practice and official representatives of the City Hall who have a limited understanding of UA. They currently see open spaces as opportunities for economic development –and UA would not be generating the highest revenues- or they see them as mainly places for public activities such as recreation.

The workshop participants identified opportunities for UA development located in both the existing and widely present allotment gardens and the remaining professional agriculture around the city. While seemingly a contradiction with the identified forms of UA in the results (see section expected forms of UA) that were more novel, more experimental or technologically more complex, this could be explained by several factors. The first is that both allotment gardens and professional farming cover a relatively large acreage in the city of Warsaw. As such, space or land sought for UA activities could easily be found in those spaces, as these spaces offer tremendous opportunities. At the same time, activities in the allotment gardens and the professional farming around Warsaw could become re-appropriated as UA activities and as such have a larger impact in terms of visibility, public acceptance, production etc. The second is that despite the awareness of UA's potential forms of the early birds, they do not expect much transformation of the UA landscape in the near future. This may indicate that the involvement of the large public in newer forms of UA is expected by the participants to be a long, difficult process. Perceptions of the main constraints for UA were more diversified among the participants. Lack of knowledge, social indifference and the fear that the food would be polluted were mentioned. Those three constraints seem to be characteristic for other cities in Poland and countries as well. However, the first and foremost barrier that was mentioned was related to urban planning and policies for UA. From the perspective of the organizing team of the workshop, it can be suggested that the participation of the City Hall representatives has most likely influenced the overall outcomes of the workshop. For the first





time the City Hall participated in the conversation and this created a new dynamic. However, the early birds participants still managed to express their opinion. The representatives of the City Hall elaborated on the main assumptions of the Warsaw spatial policy (which is not in favor of agricultural areas within the city), as well as the mechanisms of on-going transformations of agricultural land into development areas. Subsequently, the UA participants identified the inert attitude of the local authorities and urban planners due to legal regulation as the main constraint as agricultural land and open spaces have become vulnerable. The necessity of a favorable policy framework towards UA and the implementation of a more stimulating spatial planning were also mentioned as essential, but only by a few participants. Taking into account the present policy of the City Hall and the lack of general regulation on UA, this proposition seems to be premature and a few steps ahead of the current possibilities in Warsaw.

Indeed, if the early birds in Warsaw wish to move UA forward in the city, we can conclude here that first and foremost a recognition of what is UA should be ensured by both the City Hall (and policy levels higher up) and among the wider public. The opportunities that the current allotment gardens and professional farming are offering could be explored to ensure that these resourceful spaces continue to be used for food production purposes, together with an exploration and experimentation of newer, more innovative types of food production activities. Similarly an experimentation with policies and urban planning regarding UA would be desirable. It appears from our comparison within the COST Action TD1106 Urban Agriculture Europe that other member countries have already moved beyond this initial phase. It will thus be crucial to capture and support the current early birds initiatives.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, the following key points capture our observations:

- At this point, the “early birds” UA activities represent and promote mostly the social and ecological aspects of UA's potential. In addition, the role of UA in the protection of open green space in the city has been underlined. Professional production in the city linked to job creation is currently not seen as of great importance, which might be related to the initial phase UA experimentation is in.
- The majority of UA forms are recognized by the workshop participants, but they still associate UA in Warsaw with the more traditional forms (allotment gardens and agricultural holdings) for UA development Polish cities.
- A large variety of crops has been accepted, while only a limited selection of animals (bees, chicken) has been indicated as suitable for production in cities.
- A shift in the leading actors of UA is expected in the future: families, young people and different communities will replace the now mostly seniors. This indicates that younger generations are expected to become involved in food production activities, which in turn is another indication for the larger public support of UA in the future.

As already said, the results should be related to the initial phase UA development in Warsaw is in. It would thus be unfair to compare the current state of urban farming to the dynamics found in cities like Berlin, Rotterdam, New York, etc. In any case, we express the hope that this workshop was also important to start a discussion by bringing relevant stakeholders together. Hopefully future cooperations will follow. By way of conclusion, we would like to quote one of Warsaw UA “early birds” representatives:



*Although urban agriculture in Warsaw is not well-developed. However, an increasing number of actions and projects show a rapidly growing interest in the subject. Submissions for design competitions, temporary garden installations, workshops, debates, guerrilla gardening actions and forming of community gardens become popular. The scale of the actions may not be impressive at first sight compared to many other cities, we can nevertheless see a change which makes the case of Warsaw really fascinating. One of the reasons why urban gardening is less popular than in Western countries may be the general attitude towards public spaces. In most of the public parks signs saying "please do not walk on grass" have just recently been removed. As a consequence, the space meant to be common is often perceived as nobody's. Gardens in the city center are expected to decorate rather than educate or produce food. There's also a common concern about environment pollution. The existing network of amateurs of urban gardening in Warsaw can be quite easily tracked by anyone researching the topic. This is because the movement is still rather small, people actively engaged in promoting urban agriculture in Warsaw usually support each other and often cooperate. Most of local activists are not professional gardeners or landscape architects. Working in multidisciplinary teams and cooperation allow to look at the projects from different angles and add valuable perspectives. Urban agriculture in Warsaw has become popular among architects, sociologists and people interested in locally produced food.*

Opinion of Iga Kołodziej, Landscape Architect, Mint&Lavender, representatives of Warsaw UA "early birds". (Kołodziej 2014)

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