



Fighting Poverty and Hunger

What Role for Urban Agriculture?

Towns and cities are growing rapidly in developing countries. This process is often accompanied by high levels of poverty and hunger, leading many urban dwellers to engage in farming activities to help satisfy their food needs. Policy makers need to recognize this reality and actively seize the opportunities offered by urban agriculture.

Hunger - a growing concern in urban areas

The recent spike of world hunger disproportionately affected the urban poor. As a large share of their disposable income is spent on food, the 2007-08 food price crisis was particularly hard on them. The urban poor also suffered from the consequences of last year's global economic downturn, which reduced their employment opportunities and income.

Agriculture can help buffer the effects of such crises. While agriculture is largely a rural phenomenon, urban agriculture can also help increase the resilience of some urban poor to external shocks and improve their access to fresh vegetables, fruits and animal products. This mechanism would be particularly relevant in areas where inadequate infrastructure and heavy losses in transit add to the scarcity and cost of agricultural produce. Some urban farmers might also be able to offer their goods on local markets and generate income for themselves and their families.

What is urban agriculture?

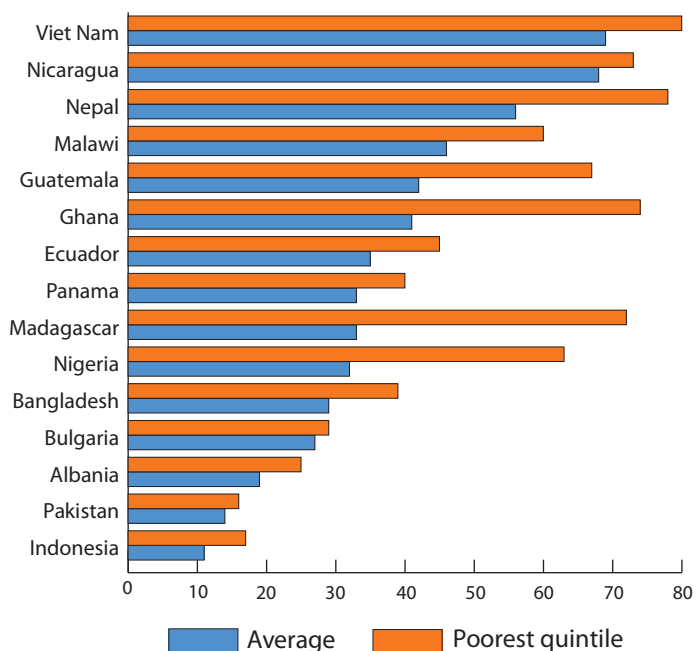
Urban agriculture describes crop and livestock production within cities and towns and surrounding areas. It can involve anything from small vegetable gardens in the backyard to farming activities on community lands by an association or neighborhood group.

In peri-urban areas, production is often intensive and commercially oriented, but farming within cities generally occurs on a smaller scale. It is commonly practiced on fallow public and private spaces, wetlands and underdeveloped areas; rarely is it found on lands specifically designated for agriculture. In many countries urban agriculture is informal and sometimes even illegal. Competition for land is a frequent source of conflict. Other contentious issues include the environmental impact of urban agriculture and food safety concerns, particularly relating to livestock production.

- Agriculture is an important activity in many urban areas
- Farming in cities and towns can improve food security, especially of the urban poor
- Depending on the local context, policy makers should seize the opportunities of urban agriculture or promote alternative ways to fight hunger

While data are scarce, urban agriculture is an important reality in many developing countries. Up to 70 percent of urban households participate in agricultural activities, according to the first systematic quantification of urban agriculture conducted by FAO, based on data from 15 developing and transition countries for which comparable statistics are available (from the Rural Income Generating Activities database).

Figure 1: Percentage of urban households participating in agricultural activities in selected countries



Source: Zezza and Tasciotti (2010).

Urban agriculture seems particularly important in low-income countries such as Malawi, Nepal and Viet Nam (see figure). But even in more developed economies such as Panama, a significant share of urban households is involved in farming activities.

Indeed, in three quarters of the countries analyzed the share of urban households participating in crop and - to a lesser extent - livestock production exceeds 30 percent. In other countries, such as Indonesia, the share is much lower, but it is not clear whether these differences are due to different economic or policy factors, or due to differences in measurement of agriculture or urban areas.

The graphic also shows that urban agriculture is particularly important for lower income groups. With very few exceptions, poor urban dwellers are more likely to participate in crop and livestock production than richer households. In many countries more than half of all urban households in the poorest expenditure quintile rely in part on agricultural activities to satisfy their food needs.

More and better food

Urban agricultural production is generally geared towards consumption within the household. Only in a few countries, including Bangladesh, Madagascar and Nepal, is more than a third of production sold on markets. Urban agriculture is thus not primarily a source of cash income, although in some countries (notably Madagascar and Nigeria) the share of income derived from urban agriculture exceeds 50 percent in the lowest income quintile.

The food security benefits of engaging in urban agriculture materialize mostly through better access to additional and more nutritious food. Indeed, urban households engaged in farming activities tend to consume greater quantities of food, sometimes as much as 30 percent more. They also seem to have a more diversified diet, as indicated by an increase in the number of food groups consumed. Relatively higher consumption of vegetables, fruits and meat products translates into an overall higher intake of energy as well as higher calorie availability.

Seizing opportunities

Urban agriculture can thus have important benefits for food security. Although the impact might be small, it can be crucial for some groups of society, such as the urban poor as well as women of reproductive age and children.

Policy responses will vary across countries - or even within the same city - depending on the specific local situation. They might also differ between specific activities, as livestock production in urban centres can be expected to pose greater challenges than maintaining a backyard garden.

In some cases benefits from urban agriculture will clearly outweigh potential negative consequences, such as environmental pollution or competition over scarce resources. In these cases policy makers should actively promote urban agriculture and find ways to integrate it in urban land-use planning. Providing guidance or training on good production techniques, for example, could minimize risks such as health hazards, water contamination and food safety concerns.

In others there might be more efficient ways to raise food security of the poor such as promoting alternative income generating activities, expanding non-agricultural employment opportunities or improving the functioning of urban food markets.

Policy makers should thus carefully weigh available options. Simply banning farming activities in cities - as has often been the case in the past - is not necessarily the best alternative. Policy responses could instead focus on improving land use rights and specifying which activities are allowed and where. Without a careful analysis of existing opportunities and risks, policy makers will miss an important opportunity to better integrate agricultural activities into urban development, and ensure that it helps to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Further information

- **Zeza, A. and L. Tasciotti (2010):** Urban agriculture, poverty, and food security: Empirical evidence from a sample of developing countries, in: *Food Policy* Vol.35(4), pp. 265-273.
- **Rural Income Generating Activities Database (RIGA):** www.fao.org/es/ESA/riga
- **FAO Food for the Cities:** www.fao.org/fcit

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