Farming Logic in Kampala

by Marilyn Lee

For residents of Kampala, Uganda, access to arable land in the city -- no matter how small an area -- is the key to better living. A study of health and wealth shows that the majority of families who can plant a few crops or raise some livestock in the city thereby ensure their well being.

The study by Prof Daniel G. Maxwell finds that an estimated 30% of all residents take part in urban agriculture. Those households involved in urban farming show a significantly improved level of health among women and children. Prof Maxwell's study also reveals that most crops in the city and on the immediate periphery, or peri-urban areas, are staple foods such as cassava, cocoyams, matooke (plantain), maize, and beans. Vegetables such as traditional greens, cabbage, tomatoes, and onions are not grown to any great extent. The livestock of choice is chickens.

THE FOUR LOGICS

In his research, Prof Maxwell identifies four logics, or rationales, for participating in urban agriculture: commercial production, self-sufficiency, food security, and no other means -- or simple survival.

While there are scattered examples of commercial cultivation of exotic crops such as coffee or vanilla beans in Kampala, the largest category of production is livestock, particularly poultry. Prof Maxwell estimates that 70% of all chickens and eggs consumed in the city are in fact produced there. But he points out that contrary to earlier theories that these entrepreneurs developed from small, home-consumption operations, this has not necessarily been the case. For some, it was a matter of smart investment," says Prof Maxwell. He studied several poultry producers and quotes one as saying, "we realized that we could positively earn income from this agriculture ... when I left banking in 1988 ... I was given two million shillings (US$10,000 at the time), and we invested it in poultry." Interestingly, these commercial entrepreneurs include both men and women, usually from households with high income levels and access to credit, according to Prof Maxwell's research.

HOUSEHOLD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Food self-sufficiency is taken to mean the ability to provide all the staple foodstuffs and sources of protein independent of outside help, except in the event of poor growing seasons or drought. While self-sufficient households may still buy some food, they are largely insulated from the high cost of living in Kampala. Prof Maxwell estimates that such households must have access to two to five acres to achieve this level of self-sufficiency. Once family needs are met, the extra food is sold," he says. "Almost without exception, the land used for growing is not owned by the family," he says. It could be leased from the city or from landowners. Some households claim squatter's rights on plots of land. This type of access to land is possible only for well established households that have long-term relations with urban land owners, says Prof Maxwell.
By far the most common rationale for urban agriculture is food security. Prof Maxwell says most families buy the bulk of their food from markets. But eventually one or more members of the household manage to gain access to some land, and work it to provide extra food for the table, and to have a food supply to draw on in case of emergency.

Such family gardens range in size from 100 square metres to as much as one-quarter of an acre. "That's not enough to live off," notes Prof Maxwell. Unlike the households following other rationales, Prof Maxwell says that those who fall into the food security category rarely sell the food they produce. Such families have income from jobs, and they consider it a priority to preserve that income for non-food expenditures.

A final rationale for urban agriculture is related to food security, but is practiced by households with fewer means. These are families that engage in urban agriculture simply to survive. "They don't have a choice, they don't have any other source of income or livelihood," says Prof Maxwell.

"Among those who turn to urban agriculture for survival are low-income, female-headed households, widows, and families abandoned by a primary wage earner," says Prof Maxwell. This group is often forced to sell some of what it produces, to pay for other needs.

**COLONIAL-ERA BYLAWS**

Prof Maxwell's research went beyond fact-finding to address the sometimes prickly issues that surround urban agriculture in Uganda. According to Prof Maxwell, urban farming is contentious primarily because of Uganda's history. Municipal bylaws, dating from the colonial era, ban cultivation in the city, with the exception of small vegetable gardens and flowers. Residents aren't allowed to keep any livestock at all, unless they get permission from city council," he says. "People farm in the city at their own peril. Technically, their crops and animals could be seized or destroyed, and they could be evicted."

Despite the narrow regulations, most farming in the city is widely tolerated in practice, since bureaucrats look the other way. No one has been thrown in jail," says Prof Maxwell. But, it could happen."

One of the problems facing urban agriculture stems from people's perceptions of what a city should be, that in a city residents do not engage in agriculture, he says. "While people have changed their attitudes, people in charge still have archaic ideas. It's these attitudes that are behind the legalities."

Prof Maxwell notes that official resistance to urban farming revolves around environmental, health, and safety concerns. Government authorities fear that unconfined livestock could spread diseases such as salmonella and brucellosis. They also fear that by allowing livestock, drainage projects could be compromised, thus contributing to the spread of malaria, says Prof Maxwell.

Prof Maxwell considers some government objections to urban agriculture to be farfetched. Among these is the official position that fields of maize would obstruct the view of drivers and cause accidents.

**INFORMATION SOURCES**

While much of Prof Maxwell's work is original research, he emphasizes that there is a good deal of information to be mined from existing surveys. For example, he points out that international agencies such as the Red Cross, UNICEF, and the Save The Children Fund, among others, have conducted nutritional surveys in the last decade to determine whether there has been a need for food assistance. From this data, researchers can determine past nutritional patterns and relate these to the level of activity in urban farming and the availability of land.

**CHANGES IN URBAN AGRICULTURE**

Since he started studying urban agriculture in Kampala, Prof Maxwell has noticed a softening of attitudes on the part of government leaders. "In 1988, I was simply told that urban agriculture was against the law.
Officials would not grant any interviews about illegal activity. But now, people are receiving delegations warmly. It's surprising to see planners and politicians now willing to talk and listen.

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