The Neglected Industry of Kenyan Cities

by John Eberlee

A national survey among urban households in Kenya lends weight to researchers around the world who argue that urban agriculture is a vital tool for alleviating poverty and achieving sustainable development in the cities of developing countries.

A rapidly growing industry, urban agriculture involves millions of Africans, Asians and Latin Americans, who raise fish, tend livestock and grow crops in tanks, ponds and backyards, on roof tops, roadsides, vacant lots, steep slopes and floodplains.

"Urban agriculture is an important coping strategy of the urban poor, many of whom say they would starve if they weren't farming," says Davinder Lamba, director of the Nairobi, Kenya-based Mazingira Institute. "However, policymakers are often blind to this and try to discourage food production in urban areas in the belief that it causes public health and traffic problems." At an IDRC workshop on urban environmental management held last May, Lamba was one of several researchers to advocate a closer look at urban agriculture. In one presentation, Jac Smit, president of Regional and Community Development Consultants in Washington, D.C., argued that sustainable development is "unthinkable" without urban agriculture, given that more than half the global population will live in urban areas in a few decades.

According to Smit and his co-author, Joe Nasr, "urban agriculture is the most efficient tool available for transforming urban wastes into food and jobs." Its potential benefits include poverty alleviation, better nutrition, a stronger economy, an improved living environment, and savings in energy, land and natural resources. The researchers concluded, however, that urban farming is "a vast opportunity missed ... because little effort has been put into optimizing [its] capacity."

This message was underlined by Davinder Lamba, who presented a paper by two colleagues that summarized the current status of urban agriculture in Kenya as revealed in a national survey by the Mazingira Institute. The first of its kind in Africa, the 1985 survey involved interviews with more than 1,500 households in Nairobi and five other towns.

The survey found that both cultivation and livestock keeping are widespread in Kenyan cities and towns. In 1985, the value of crops grown in urban areas in one season was estimated at US$4 million, which represents a considerable contribution to national agricultural production. Despite this, government policies seldom address the needs of urban farmers.

LONG HISTORY

Urban agriculture has a long history in Kenya, said Lamba. It began around 1899, when immigrant Indians living in railway towns sold their surplus produce to Europeans. Since then, market gardens have been a consistent feature of the urban landscape. However, over the last 40 years, urban farming has evolved into a primarily subsistence activity, practised by families of all income groups. Today, 77% of urban farmers
grow food entirely for their own use.

The expansion of urban agriculture in Kenya has paralleled both the population growth of urban areas and negative economic growth. Between 1948 and 1989, the proportion of urban dwellers increased from 4.5-14.8% of the population, and is projected to reach 24.7% by the year 2000. But economic prospects for urban migrants are generally dismal.

"Ever since the energy crisis of the 1970s, said Lamba in an interview, "they've seen high unemployment levels, rising food and fuel costs, and depressed wages. In absolute consumption terms, Kenya's cities are composed of very poor people who are driven to find ways to survive."

According to the Mazingira Institute survey, about two out of every three urban households cope by growing their own food and 29% do so in urban areas.

Similarly, 51% of families keep livestock and 17% keep urban livestock. In the smaller towns, 100% of families supplement their diets by gathering indigenous vegetables that grow wild.

ACCESS TO URBAN LAND

Urban farming is practised by more than nine out of ten families who actually have access to urban land. Families living in smaller towns tend to have the best access to urban land and very low income families in large cities have the least.

"While higher income families tend to farm in backyards, those who don't have backyards farm wherever they can find the land to do it -- in valleys, on roadsides, near railtracks and so on," said Lamba.

In Kenya, the majority of urban farmers cannot afford commercial agricultural inputs such as fertilizers. However, 30% use manure and one in four use compost, which they generally obtain either through informal barter or produce themselves. The survey also revealed that 45% of urban farmers water their crops, of whom 71% use piped town water. This rate is higher than the proportion of rural farmers who irrigate, and partly explains why agricultural productivity is higher among subsistence farmers in urban areas as compared to those in rural areas.

Like urban crop production, the value of livestock produced in towns and cities is significant. At the time of the survey, there were an estimated 1.4 million head of livestock -- worth about US$17 million -- kept in all of urban Kenya, not counting animals that died, were eaten or were sold during the year. Chickens and rabbits were the most common livestock. There were also plenty of goats, sheep and cattle, especially in the smaller towns. Most urban farmers let their animals roam freely, except in Nairobi where lower income households keep them penned because of space constraints.

Traditionally, livestock represent wealth and status in the Kenyan economy, but they are primarily a source of protein among the urban poor. Unfortunately, mortality rates of urban livestock are very high. In 1985, more animals died than were used for food. Disease is a principal cause, said Lamba. "Less than a quarter of the urban farmers dip, spray or vaccinate their livestock." Moreover, many animals may be underfed because few households can afford to buy feed. According to Lamba, the survey suggests that a change of attitude toward urban agriculture by government officials is overdue. In Kenya, everything from agricultural policies to zoning bylaws act as hindrances to urban farmers. Although a few towns, including Isiolo, actively support agricultural activities, in most municipalities crop and livestock extension services, such as irrigation and veterinary care, are simply unavailable.

For would-be urban farmers, the chief constraint is access to land, he added. "Despite the increasing ruralization of Kenyan towns and cities, many Kenyans and their leaders continue to associate cities and modernity ... [and] have sought, in the face of considerable adversity ... to maintain artificially high urban standards inherited from measures designed to protect public health."
For example, the Local Government Act gives every town the power to either permit or restrict urban farming. As a result, cultivation is prohibited on many Nairobi streets and is actively prevented on unused public lands in some other towns, apparently without considering the consequences. "As law enforcers at the local level," explained Lamba, "if you harass people, impound their sheep and goats, and cut their crops, you might think you're doing the right thing because sheep and goats excrete and create a health hazard."

"But in the absence of providing alternatives such as jobs for the unemployed, you're making a situation go from bad to worse either by design or by accident," he concludes. "In effect, urban farming becomes an ethical issue from a policy standpoint."

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Davinder Lamba
Mazingira Institute
P.O. Box 14550
Nairobi, Kenya
Tel.: (254) 2 443219/ 443226/443229 Fax: (254) 2 444643

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