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A Plot of One's Own in West African Cities

by Andre Lachance

The world's cities are surrounded by countryside and produce astonishing amounts of vegetables, fruit, cereals and even fish and meat. Even in the cities, people grow corn and sorghum, farm carp, and feed chickens, pigs, goats and rabbits -- when they are not lovingly tending delicate orchids.

In the developing world, urban farming is fast becoming a tangible, cost-effective way of responding to the overwhelming problems of resource scarcity and waste management. It is, at least, the beginning of a solution -- an original strategy to ensure the survival of the millions of economic casualties of today's impoverished, recessionary economies. Urban agriculture is undoubtedly more widespread than is acknowledged; it has become a ubiquitous, complex and dynamic feature of the urban and socio-economic landscape in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

FARMING ON OUR DOORSTEP

Urban farming is very common in African cities, and with good reason. Urban orchards and market gardens make Mali's capital self-sufficient in citrus fruits and vegetables. The same is true in Togo, where the capital, Lome, grows enough vegetables to meet its own needs.

"In the African cities, a large amount of land is used for farming in and out of season," explains Souleymane Diallo, Research Coordinator with ENDA (Environnement et Developpement du Tiers-Monde) in Senegal. "Farming on our doorsteps can now be found all over our cities. The local people are slowly learning the tricks of the trade, particularly as far as out of season cultivation is concerned. This takes time, however, because produce is traditionally grown only during the rainy season."

Mr. Diallo, who has been commissioned by IDRC to catalogue research on urban farming in West Africa, nevertheless feels that we must remain objective when trying to assess its potential. He says that he even sees a link between the development of urban farming and the increasing poverty of African countries: "Urban farming undoubtedly creates jobs, but at what cost? The countryside is emptying out. A city like Bamako, for instance, is currently experiencing a population growth rate of 8% a year! It's hardly surprising that migrants are turning to urban farming, since there are no other jobs."

"We must nonetheless recognize that this form of farming is extremely useful," he adds, "It has even changed the food eaten in the cities: carrots, peppers, cucumbers and lettuce can be found today, although they were previously unknown."

JOB CREATION

Urban farming takes hold first in high-density areas. This is hardly surprising: in several African cities, poor households, who spend over half their income on food, have an interest in becoming involved in it. The women especially have made it their "business." A not inconsiderable benefit is that urban farming

generates income and jobs for artisans (blacksmiths, masons, carpenters, etc.), as well as in the service sector (transportation of fertilizer, plant-health products and seed, distribution of mechanical pumps, etc.) and marketing.

Urban farming, however, also has its limits. Since it generally occurs on "precarious" land, -- i.e., land whose availability depends on the whim of city planners -- the long-term viability is not always clear. Tolerance of city farming thus varies from place to place. Despite successful results, the authorities in Bamako, for example, have banned the cultivation of cereals since 1989 on the grounds that the tall stalks provide hiding places for bandits. Likewise in Bafoussan, Cameroon, where the mayor had all the corn plants cut down, supposedly to make the town a healthier place.

Only two African countries have so far officially come out in favour of urban farming: Zaire, which introduced it as an official project with outside financial assistance, thereby subsidizing access to water and drainage; and Nigeria, which has made all inputs (fertilizers, seed, etc.) tax free.

Limited access to good water for urban farming creates enormous problems in sub-Saharan Africa. In many cities, traditional wells are often still in use. Some stopgap remedies, primarily the use of polluted water, expose producers and consumers to potential dangers. The risks are real: soil contamination, ground water pollution, traces of heavy metal in vegetables, etc.

"People often do it without being aware of the risks involved," explains Mr. Diallo. "People water their gardens with contaminated water. Thus in Dakar and in some parts of Lome, the people use sewer water to water their crops. As it is intensive farming, moreover, more inputs are needed, thereby polluting the land and the ground water. We still do not know its full impact."

Certainly, the environmental impact of urban farming still has to be explored in West Africa, as elsewhere in the world. If current trends persist, over half the world's population will live in cities in 20 years' time. Ecologically viable urbanization thus seems impossible without urban and periurban farming, which increasingly appears a worthwhile way of processing waste into food and creating desperately needed jobs.

FARMING ON DAKAR'S EDGE by Luc Mougeot

Nearly 200 men and women grow three vegetable crops per year in the interdunal depressions of Tanibou-Dabo, Hann and Patte d'Oie-Grand Yoff to supply the Dakar market. On a water catchment concession of the Service National d'Exploitation des Eaux du Senegal (SNEES) currently not in service at Grand-Yoff, they do so free of charge. In return they guard the pumping facility against vandalism. The farmers extended a network of channels and tanks out from the station's well to ease crop watering. The water table is at a depth of 2 to 20 m. Crops are sequenced from the bottom to the top of the depression. Corn, vegetables, produce and tree nurseries are placed close to the well and canals, and full-grown mango and cherry trees are sited on high ground.

Fenced with used tires and discarded packaging, these fields lay next to a large collection of plank and tin pens where barricaded pigs feed on domestic wastes. A fish-smoking compound is also built and fuelled from city wastes. The operation produces fish esophagi that are sold to Japanese pharmaceutical companies, the manager said.

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