

Investigating the Impact of Urban Agriculture in Harare, Zimbabwe



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Joan Brickhill

[Photo: Harare city by-laws have traditionally discouraged urban agriculture.]

In January, nine people were shot and killed by the police and army during Zimbabwe's first food riots. There were also reports of deaths in local jails after thousands of alleged looters were arrested, many of them women with babies on their backs. The riots followed the latest in a series of price increases for basic foodstuffs — increases that have devastated the lives of the urban poor since the introduction of IMF/World Bank economic reforms in 1991. In a country where three-quarters of the population is poor or very poor, there are now a lot of angry people unable to feed their families.

Not surprisingly, the Zimbabwe government has turned a blind eye to the uncontrolled growth of urban agriculture in Harare and other urban centres. From 1990 to 1994, the amount of land under cultivation in Harare nearly doubled — to about 16% of the city's area — and has been rising rapidly ever since. The main reason for this phenomenal growth was the relaxation of by-laws governing urban agriculture in 1993, in a bid to alleviate poverty linked to the structural adjustment programme, says [Brian Mutimbanyoka](#), a spokesman for [Environment 2000](#), a local non-governmental organization.

This year, Harare city councillors decided not to slash illegally cultivated maize, a move that has been attacked by environmental groups. They are concerned about the threats to drinking water posed by chemical fertilizers, and by sedimentation in the major dams and lakes supplying the city. "Once rivers and streams silt up, there will forever be a shortage of water," warns Environment 2000.

Long-running conflict

The long-running conflict between urban dwellers and local authorities — plus mounting concern about impacts to public health and natural resources — prompted [ENDA-Zimbabwe](#), a non-governmental organization, to undertake an extensive study of urban agriculture in Harare. (ENDA stands for Environmental and Development Activities.) The study was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which also provided technical support and helped organize local workshops.

According to [Daniel Sithole](#), a research officer for ENDA-Zimbabwe, the project provided detailed information to policy makers so that the whole issue of urban agriculture could be addressed with facts and figures. "City managers and outsiders view the gains from urban farming as just marginal and consequently the activity has been despicably underrated," he explains. In fact, the study revealed that urban agriculture is now the main coping strategy used by poor households in Harare. It also showed that low income urban farmers are economically and nutritionally better off than their counterparts. For example, children under five from farming households have higher rates of growth in weight and height than those of non-farmers.

Environmental damage

At the same time, the study highlighted the issue of environmental damage. It found that conservation measures were not being used in practitioners' fields. For example, all sites had unacceptable levels of erosion. In addition, almost 90% of Harare farmers use chemical fertilizers and nearly a third of "off-plot" cultivation takes place near streams, swamps or "vleis" (a type of wetland) — leading to water pollution through runoff and leaching. The ENDA-Zimbabwe team concluded that urban agriculture will pose a serious threat to the urban environment if suitable conservation measures are not implemented.

The research team's central recommendation was that urban planners should develop policies to enhance sustainable urban agricultural development, rather than seek ways to eradicate this practice. For example, it advocated stiffer penalties for stream bank cultivation as well as the encouragement of conservation practices including minimum tillage, and terracing on steep slopes and contour ridges. It also called for the formation of urban farming groups and the provision of agricultural extension services — particularly to the most disadvantaged sectors of the urban population.

Increased awareness

Sithole believes the project has increased awareness among Harare urban planners, although there is still a need to lobby for more policy changes. "I think we've had a lot of impact on local government, we've held a lot of workshops, but it remains to be seen whether this will produce results," he says. "If the by-laws are relaxed further, people will start cultivating openly and with a sense of responsibility. At the moment, they're not interested in putting resources and effort into doing it sustainably because they know that, at any time, their maize can be slashed."

Another team member, [Momo Masoka](#), says that because urban agriculture is a reality for most modern cities, governments should reform their policies to accommodate it. "I think it has succeeded in the [North], but failed in the African countries I've studied because of a lack of cohesive and coherent policies at local and central government level," he concludes.

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