

Utilising Rooftop Farming to Teach Job Skills

On the roof of an office building in East Oslo, seven storeys above passing trams and buses, 12 young adults have spent their summer growing food. Tak for Maten, Oslo's premier rooftop garden built in 2017 in a multicultural and gentrifying area of downtown Oslo, includes over 30 raised beds, a greenhouse, bee hives, fruit trees, and laying hens. The summer of 2018 has seen the space grow and develop as local youth have taken part in a job programme over the school holidays.

The organisation

Nabolagshager (or Neighbourhood Gardens) was founded by Helene Gallis in 2013 to advance the young urban agriculture scene in Oslo. The organisation has been a key stakeholder in promoting and expanding food production in the city by challenging the status quo and establishing groundbreaking projects. Nabolagshager's portfolio includes managing community gardens with vulnerable groups such as refugees, building Oslo's first aquaponics system and training thousands of participants in basic gardening skills through courses and events. The organisation's approach is centred on utilising urban agriculture as a way to create places – unique, social meeting areas where urban residents can de-stress, connect and grow. Some of the spaces utilised for this work include community gardens, rooftops, public parks and even libraries. This strategy creates a suitable climate for social cohesion, strengthening communities and reducing problems associated with urban environments.

In addition, Nabolagshager has focused significant attention on growing green employment in the belief that the global



Miriam, one of the participants of the summer programme, harvests and checks on progress. Photo by Mandel & Sesam

The Norwegian context

In spite of having only 4% arable land and a very short season, agriculture has always been the backbone of Norwegian society. However, with a strong, oil-fuelled economy over the last 50 years, a shift has occurred from self-sufficiency to dependence on global food trade. Today, Norway produces only around 40-45% of the food the nation consumes.

The modern urban agriculture movement has been slow to develop. Most of the working population in Norway takes all or part of the month of July off from work and away from home. With a very short growing season, a key reason for the relative infancy of the urban agriculture scene within Oslo may be that the workforce and volunteers behind initiatives seem to become less available as the need for garden maintenance increases. While the July vacation culture is strong, many low-income families are excluded from participating. This creates the possibility of summer employment and an eagerness for novel experiences to take back to school in the fall.

For many immigrant groups, a lack of familiarity with allotment gardens, an unfamiliar gardening climate or even limited knowledge of Norwegian staples such as kohlrabi or sugar snaps can be barriers to engaging in urban agriculture. Yet in recent years, innovative approaches to urban agriculture have blossomed, including public funding schemes for urban agriculture, pilot projects in rooftop farming and aquaponics, edible gardens for school children and kindergartens as well as an increasing number of public community gardens.

urban agriculture craze needs sustainable financial models in order to move forward. This has involved a group of consultants testing various business models around aquaponics, vertical farming, rooftop farming and academic partnerships. Nabolagshager recognises that, with looming challenges to the global food supply, expanding localised knowledge and spaces within which to share that knowledge is increasingly important.

The setting

Nabolagshager is situated in Grønland, an East Oslo neighbourhood now undergoing significant gentrification. It is a vibrant neighbourhood where ethnic restaurants, immigrant-run vegetable shops and mosques are found side by side with hipster bars. Grønland is a first haven for many refugees and immigrants; it hosts recent immigrant groups that experience low participation in the workforce and high poverty rates. In Norway, immigrants – or Norwegians born to immigrant parents – make up 17.3% of the population. In Oslo these groups constitute around 30% of residents. It is a



A view of the garden looking west. Photo by Mandel & Sesam

diverse group, spanning many decades of immigration and many cultural and religious backgrounds, with Somalis, Pakistanis and Iraqis making up the largest groups of non-western immigrants.

Through their work in East Oslo, Nabolagshager has become increasingly aware of the challenges that young immigrants and children of immigrants face when struggling to complete high school and when seeking employment. Up to 40% of high school students in the district of Gamle Oslo, where Grønland is located, never finish their education; the dropout rate is particularly high among boys of minority background. Additionally, social connections are increasingly important when applying for a job, a trend that puts new residents at an additional disadvantage and is difficult to address.

The programme

There is a strong need for fresh thinking around how to inspire youth regarding taking charge of their future, facilitating the development of new role models and creating employment based on local skill sets. This was the motivation behind establishing a collaboration with the local high school, Hersleb Videregående Skole. The goal was to allow local youth the opportunity to build their resume and acquire positive references for gaining future employment. For the school it has been a test of collaborating with external stakeholders to seek innovative solutions to its students' structural sociodemographic challenges.

Through various private and public grants, Nabolagshager was able to offer 12 local youth, aged 16 to 20, a union wage for part-time work over ten weeks during the summer of 2018. Under the direction of mentors and in groups of no more than four, the youths planted, cared for and harvested food, and participated in construction projects and animal

care. In addition the youths were trained through workshops in important workplace skills such as project planning and management. Theoretical training in urban agriculture connected high school science knowledge to a real-life setting. Additionally, a first job offered an important step towards adulthood, which is especially important in low-income families.

The impact

Through interviews with the 12 youth employed by the summer programme, Nabolagshager is currently working with various academic researchers to assess the summer programme in order to shape future work. Not all of this data is yet available, but staff and mentors have already begun to reflect on the impact of the work.

1. Not all youth are familiar with or enjoy physical work. While a few of the 12 youth were interested in agriculture, the majority were simply looking to make money and build their CV. Nabolagshager was able to adapt their summer programme: from event planning to carpentry to social media management, strengths that came to light of young individuals in the programme were utilised to promote urban agriculture in Oslo. This served as a reminder that in coalition building, diversity fuels resilience.
2. All of the participants had a minority background, most having grown up in Norway. In addition the programme employed several migrants from conflict areas. As the residence status of such individuals seems to be in constant flux, a philosophical question emerged around the role of urban agriculture. One of the programme participants expressed joy in being able to grow something – an understandable sentiment for a young person who, as a minor, migrated without parents through multiple countries over several years in order to escape conflict,



Photo by Mandel & Sesam

with few possibilities to put down roots. These individuals may be forced, or may choose, to return to their homelands at some point in the future. Part of Nabolagshager's goal in the work in East Oslo is to cultivate knowledge and inspiration with regard to urban agriculture so that migrants, immigrants and children of immigrants can build positive communities in Oslo and, perhaps, back in their country of origin.

3. Students with a refugee background and language limitations demonstrated alternative skills when working with other youth. These youth shone as leaders during various projects such as constructing a chicken coop or developing guerrilla gardening strategies, demonstrating that urban agriculture can be an excellent form of enhancing social inclusion through shared activities.
4. The training the youth received and the mentor assessments have been incorporated into letters of recommendation that are available for the youth to utilise in seeking future employment opportunities. Many participants have also expressed an interest in exploring further job opportunities with Nabolagshager or in related fields.

The longer term: not just a summer programme

Nabolagshager's vision of this programme is to assemble teams of youth to help with the services and consulting offered by the organisation, as well as to serve as leaders and mentors in similar, future programmes. By developing a variety of career paths in urban agriculture for at-risk youth, the impact can be scaled up and will be sustainable over time.

The programme has provided at-risk youth with a fresh breath of inspiration. Emerging from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, these youth will become important change agents for a shift to an ecological mindset and become role models for a new, multicultural, green generation. The partnering high school now wants to be the "greenest" high school in Oslo. For Nabolagshager the lesson is that garden knowledge often applies to society as a whole: even a weak seedling that nobody expects to survive can thrive and provide a bountiful harvest if given the right nurturing and support.

Time and again, Norway is ranked among the "best" countries in which to live. However, even in a politically stable and economically wealthy country, there are huge differences between the "haves" and "have-nots". In our globalised world it is interesting to see how urban agriculture serves as a tool for empowerment and connecting people of different backgrounds. The fact that utilising urban agriculture for building life and workplace skills among youth resonates so well across continents and cultures is a testament to the relevance of food production within cities, both today and far into the future.

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