



Community-Led Urban Agriculture Policy Making: A View from the United States

Samina Raja
Chunyuan Diao

Buffalo community garden. Photo by Samina Raja and Jennifer Whittaker

The practice of growing food for sustenance and sale is anything but new to city dwellers in the United States, and this is also true for the role of city policy in urban agriculture. As early as the late 1800s, officials in a number of cities, including Buffalo and Detroit, established agricultural programs to support the cultivation of urban land to address unemployment and hunger following an economic recession (Raja, Picard et al. 2014). Yet shifting planning and societal attitudes in the mid-1900s removed agriculture as a permitted land use in urban areas, trading food production for other types of land use. The romance of the City Beautiful movement which emphasised grandeur, for example, overlooked the importance of functional urban food practices, including production and butchering, in American cities. This was also the start of an era of industrialisation in the food industry, with Americans experiencing the advent of processed and convenience foods. The urban food system – including urban agriculture – was not seen as paramount to the quality of city life. This attitude carried into urban planning practices and policies for decades. In recent decades, the role of city governments in urban agriculture has been somewhat tenuous. Some city governments, motivated by neoliberal ideas of development, view urban agriculture as a temporary use of land. Still, many city dwellers hold a drastically different view on urban agriculture, and these views are quite heterogeneous.

Urban agriculture in US cities is most compelling as a

movement of resistance. Yet a growing contemporary discourse presents urban agriculture as a desirable neighbourhood amenity attractive to millennials and economically upwardly mobile populations. This popular and often elitist narrative masks the origins of, and city dwellers' heterogeneous views about, urban agriculture. For many residents, especially in low-income neighbourhoods, urban cultivation remains a tactic of resistance and of reclaiming blighted vacant land in the face of local government negligence toward addressing urban challenges such as food insecurity, crime, deteriorating built environments, etc. Other residents view urban agriculture as a community-building opportunity, especially when the practice brings together people of diverse backgrounds. Yet many others, such as new immigrants, practice urban agriculture as a means to provide food for themselves. For some immigrants cultivation is also a marker of their agrarian identities from their countries of origin. No matter the motivation, urban agriculture initiatives, ranging from small-scale community gardens to large-scale commercial agricultural operations, have proliferated steadily across the United States in the last fifteen years.

As enthusiasm for urban agriculture has grown, city governments have had to take notice. In particular, city government planning agencies, which are charged with the responsibility for preparing and implementing official plans and policies, have had to grapple with residents' burgeoning

interest in urban agriculture. Some city governments have responded favourably by creating supportive policy environments that amplify the efforts of urban agriculture advocates, while other city governments remain averse to urban agriculture (Hodgson, Caton Campbell and Bailkey, 2011). City governments where policy support is relatively strong for urban agriculture include those of Baltimore (see also article on p25 (Whitton, Leccese and Hodgson 2015), Buffalo, Cleveland (Fodor and Hodgson 2015), Madison, Minneapolis (Hodgson and Fodor 2015), New York, San Francisco and Seattle (Whitton and Hodgson 2015). Yet these cities are exceptions. Many other municipal governments remain apathetic about the potential of urban agriculture, and offer limited policy support for urban agriculture even when it is being practised across their city. Cities' policy support, which depends on a variety of factors, is greater when there are strong community collaborative networks and a champion within city government (Raja et al. 2014).

In the subsequent sections, drawing on a national survey, we explore broad trends in how and *why* local governments and planners across the United States are engaging in urban agriculture. For more depth, we highlight case examples from two cities – Buffalo, New York, and Madison, Wisconsin – where community-led interest in urban agriculture has laid the groundwork for city government policy reform. We conclude with a discussion of what challenges might be encountered in creating city policies that sustain urban agriculture, and outline potential ideas for the future.

National survey results

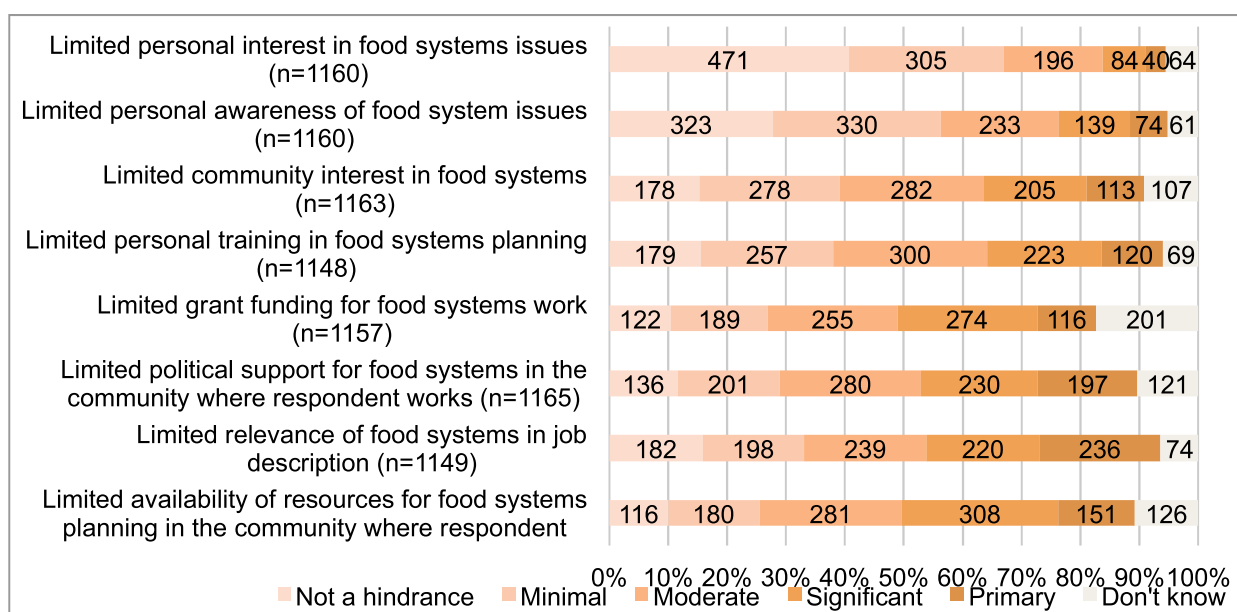
In 2014, the Growing Food Connections project, a partnership of researchers and the American Planning Association (APA), conducted a national survey to gauge the extent of local governments' engagement in using public policy to strengthen food systems. The survey was administered to

members of the American Planning Association, the largest professional association of planners in the United States. The full report of this national survey is available at: <http://growingfoodconnections.org/research/state-of-food-systems-planning-in-the-us/>; here we summarise the results. The data extracted represents responses of only those APA member respondents who work for or on behalf of local and regional governments.

Survey results suggest that food is no longer “a stranger” to the local government planning agenda, but that much work remains to be done. About 75 % of respondents report that, in their current position, they have no to minimal engagement in food systems planning. Fewer than 7% of respondents report either that food systems work is a top work priority, or that they are significantly engaged in the work. Respondents' limited familiarity with food systems planning is a plausible explanation for their low level of involvement in the work. About 50 % of respondents reported that their familiarity with food systems planning was non-existent (9.2 %) to minimal (49.6%).

This lack of familiarity with food systems planning is not the only explanation for why planners in the United States appear to be lagging in their engagement in food systems planning. Results from the APA survey point to a number of other hindrances, as displayed in Figure 1. Respondents point to lack of resources and no reference to food systems planning in their job description as key reasons for their personal limited engagement in food systems planning. In open-ended responses respondents noted that higher levels of government, such as federal and state governments, provide no mandate for engaging in food systems planning. The absence of state and federal mandates for food systems planning is a reflection of the overall structure of how planning unfolds in the United States, where consid-

Figure 1. Local Government planners' perception of hindrances to their personal engagement in food systems planning.



Source: 2014 APA Members' Survey, University at Buffalo, Growing Food Connections Project



Massachusetts Avenue Project engages neighbourhood youth to advocate for policy and planning change on urban growing practices. Photo by Massachusetts Avenue Project

erable planning power rests in local levels of government in many states. Other respondents' comments suggest that planners have a rather narrow view of planning as a profession, overemphasising design guidelines, regulatory frameworks and more traditional planning sub-topics, and this may hinder their engagement in urban agriculture and food systems. Such a narrow view is curious given planning's claim to be a broad, interdisciplinary field. Overall, although food is beginning to gather attention, structural reform, which would include food systems planning as a core function of planning, has yet to come to fruition – and the urban agriculture food movement continues to depend on the work of extraordinary leaders within city governments. Until city governments, and indeed all levels and sectors of government, recognise the importance of urban agriculture for civic life, and until they commit public resources including staffing, physical infrastructure and funding, urban agriculture will remain a marginalised activity.

Leadership in policy reform

Although the US survey results reported in the earlier section paint a somewhat dismal picture of planners' engagement in food systems planning, as noted earlier, many cities are witnessing considerable policy action in support of urban agriculture and food systems. Below we report two unique cases – Madison and Buffalo – with markedly different trajectories over the last fifteen years. The city of Madison, a fairly progressive affluent city in the Midwest, was a leader in the food movement in the US, whereas Buffalo, a post-industrial gritty city witnessed a rise in the urban agriculture movement as a response to severe urban decline. While Madison has matured, and some would argue, plateaued in its effort to address food *injustices*, Buffalo is just coming into its own.