

Exploring Urban Agroecology as a Framework for Transitions to Sustainable and Equitable Regional Food Systems

Social and political context in which urban agroecology emerges. Urban agroecology has in the last year appeared as a topic in debates on the future of sustainable agriculture and food systems. Two parallel developments create the background to this newly emerging area. Firstly, there is growing attention on the urban dimensions of food system challenges and on the potential role of cities in promoting a transition towards more sustainable and equitable food systems. This is illustrated by over 150 cities joining the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact to both publically state and claim their role in strengthening urban and regional food systems. The New Urban Agenda, adopted at the Habitat3 conference in Quito, puts ample attention on urban food security challenges and the need to reinforce urban-rural linkages; and most of all, through bottom-up development of urban food strategies by local city governments and citizens across the globe.

Secondly, in the last 5-10 years we have witnessed a growing recognition for agroecology as a promising approach for guiding a transition towards sustainable agriculture and food systems. Agroecology is still strongly based on grass-roots movements of small farmers and peasants, but has gained attention in international debates by institutions such as the UNCTAD and the FAO, who started a regional consultation process around the topic. The agroecology framework is especially promising, as it fully recognises the negative ecological effects of conventional food production systems but also gives central attention to the co-management of ecological resources in future agri-food development options. In addition it increasingly recognises the role that reinforced urban-rural linkages play in such models of co-management.

Key elements of the current food system crisis

Urban agroecology therefore appears as a promising approach for debates about the future urban food system. It is important to recognise that the current food system crisis is characterised as:

- A multidimensional and systemic crisis, which developed in the last 3 to 4 decades and simultaneously affects a range of economic, ecological, social, health and cultural aspects.
- A confrontation between two different and opposing agri-food development models or paradigms, with different values and frames for looking at food systems.
- A crisis of food governance mechanisms, i.e. the ways in which we make decisions about food-related issues. Current decision making processes are now outdated; the now 40+ year old view that food production is all about efficiency and that food and farming can be institutionalised as a separate sector, is no longer fit for purpose. The search for new food governance mechanisms, sometimes by engaged policy makers but more often driven by civil society groups, is very much the basis for the new dynamic we see occurring.

Why does food appear on the urban agenda?

Agroecology provides an interesting framework to better understand and design sustainable urban and regional food systems, but at the same time it needs to be further developed. Much of the current work strongly focuses on rural contexts with small scale and peasant farmers as key actors in the management of agroecosystems. Such approaches continue to be relevant but they insufficiently address the specific nature of food systems in urban and peri-urban contexts.

The strong, sometimes one-sided, focus on rural dimensions of food systems does not only apply to agroecology. There is a general need to better understand why food has emerged so strongly on urban agendas in recent years. Two decades ago agricultural and food policy were almost synonymous to rural policy. Nowadays, we see that issues such as food consumption practices, organic production in urban and peri-urban settings, reduction of food waste, and local and proximate food economies are key elements for an urban agroecological framework.

The (re-) appearance of food on urban agendas can be understood in the light of Carolyn Steel's ground-breaking work on the history of cities in relation to food. In her book "Hungry Cities" she convincingly shows that when looking at urban history through a food lens, it is clear that at some point we lost the awareness of the intrinsic relation between food and cities. *"We live in a world shaped by food. It determines our survival, our politics and economics. How, then, have we come to consider food as just another*



Photo by Madrid Agroecológico

commodity? Our profound disconnection with food is the curious legacy of industrialisation. It is also the symptom of a way of life we can no longer afford. Food is not only a powerful shaper of our lives, but one that we can harness as a tool."

Food as a powerful transformative tool

From this perspective it is clear that food continues to be an important and powerful tool for social and economic transformation in cities. This is essential for understanding the many things that are happening in urban agroecology and why it is promising for future urban agendas. Food is appearing on different political agendas, ranging from economic development and employment generation to environment, climate change, health, social inclusion and waste management, and provides a starting point to address such issues in an integrated way. Relocalising food systems in and around cities for all these agendas, at least hypothetically, emerges as an important factor in seeking solutions to the multiple crises that current society faces.

It is especially by building interconnections and synergies between agendas that such solutions are shaped. Health and wellbeing on the one hand are important drivers for food system change, but at the same time provide a starting point for developing markets and demand for local and organic foods. Similarly, food production in urban and peri-urban areas provides opportunities to create synergies with urban waste and water management from a perspective of urban metabolism. Also, issues around social coherence and local identity are connected to food producing activities and provide an important entry point for rebuilding trust in local governance. In Spain, agroecology and food policy emerge strongly on local municipalist agendas, as a network of almost 20 cities have organised themselves around the topic of agroecology. This is a way to regain and reinforce local and democratic control over food systems, which in many respects is the essence of urban agroecology.

Learning from the diversity of urban agroecological practices

A key element to further develop urban agroecology is to build on the many experiences and upcoming practices in cities. Many cases of urban and peri-urban agriculture around the world apply non-chemical production methods and in some cases explicitly identify themselves as agroecological. Examples include Quito, Rosario, Cape Town, Havana, and the Western Province of Sri Lanka. These and other cases show that there is a strong basis for urban agroecology, but also that what is specific to agroecology in an urban context needs to be better defined. Experiences show that common approaches in rural agroecology do not necessarily work in urban settings – for example restoring soil processes is not always possible in urban contexts where soils are often contaminated and ecosystem processes are disturbed. However the urban context provides specific knowledge, resources and capacities which are sometimes lacking in rural settings. This is for example the case with the development of short marketing channels and direct producer-consumer relations, participatory approaches in labour mobilisation and certification, and initiatives in the area of solidarity economy.

These experiences indicate a strong case for further dialogue and collaboration between urban agriculture, city region food policies and agroecology. The different contributions to this issue provide a rich source of practical experiences to feed this dialogue and indicate how, in different social, cultural and policy contexts, agroecology is becoming a key factor in urban food policies.

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