



Urban Agroecology: For the city, in the city and from the city!

Daniela Adil Oliveira de Almeida
André Ruoppolo Biazoti

Urban citizens of São Paulo sowing for the creation of the Cultural Center Community Garden. Photo by Pops Lopes

Over the last 20 years, several organisations and individuals researching and working with urban agriculture and agroecology in Brazil have accumulated experiences in different local territories. Several national networks and forums, such as the Brazilian Association of Agroecology - ABA (aba-agroecologia.org.br/wordpress), the National Articulation of Agroecology - ANA (www.agroecologia.org.br), and the National Urban Agriculture Collective (www.facebook.com/cnagricurbana), have supported and articulated experiences of agroecology and urban agriculture. Agroecology is conceptualised simultaneously as a science, a political movement and a social practice. The central concept is the reproduction of life and common interest, distancing these networks from the logic of commodification and industrialisation imposed by the agribusiness sector and the contemporary food system.

Concepts of agroecology

The agroecological approach allows us to observe situations in which some of the “agricultures” present in cities and metropolitan areas differ from the pure market-oriented and industrial logic of production. Instead they connect the social function and the value of land, so as to configure new

metropolitan territories, and to reinvigorate livelihoods centred on socio-environmental reproduction.

However, some conceptual approaches reinforce urban-rural or urban-nature dichotomies, by associating “the urban” with the built environment, or with the legal demarcation of the urban perimeter. On the other hand, other approaches idealise the countryside as a space of tradition, nature, agricultural practices and the production of food and raw materials. This is in opposition to the notion of the city as a space of consumption, services, production of knowledge, innovation and creativity.

Different experiences, different approaches

Three approaches identified in the Brazilian “agroecological field” articulate, in different ways, agroecology and urban agriculture, as well as different concepts of the city and urban versus rural areas. Two approaches, identified as agroecology **for the city** and agroecology **in the city**, somehow reinforce the usual approach to the urban and the rural as separate (though complementary) spaces. They attribute an essentially rural character to certain agricultural practices even if located in urban spaces or identify the rural “within” the urban. The agriculture carried out in the city is associated with rural memories, ancestral practices and peasant identities transformed by the urban way of life.

‘Agroecology **for the city**’ seems to affirm rural areas as territories in which market-oriented and urban supply agriculture must be located. Spaces such as “green belts” or peri-urban areas are usually considered as “non-cities”. The interference of the “urban” is however recognised, together with the benefits of proximity to urban infrastructure such as cultural facilities, transport networks, and other services. There are also corresponding forms of income generation.

Urban spaces are thought of in terms of consumption and access to markets, not as territories where agriculture can and is being developed. In this logic, the emphasis is on the importance of farmers' interaction with cities (especially through participation in farmers' markets), with a view to increase awareness of the urban population on the importance and benefits of family farming and preservation of rural production areas for cities. Initiatives of people who opted for job opportunities and "a country" lifestyle are also commonly incorporated into this type of narrative.

"Agroecology **in the city**" sees the "islands" of rurality in urban areas, as artificial and built-up spaces. They are valued in the perspective of seeking sustainability in cities. Urban agricultural spaces are seen as green areas that are idyllic rural areas within the urban fabric. In this perspective, the producers' rural knowledge is valued and urban agriculture is seen as the expression of this knowledge. From the point of view of agroecology, the prevailing perception is that knowledge migrates along with people, from rural territories to urban spaces, bringing with them the practices and ways of understanding the world based on work in the countryside. Such spaces are generally "invisible" due to their reduced participation in the urban capitalist economy. Or they are interpreted as remnants of a rural heritage that have not yet been transformed by modernity and urban expansion.

"Agroecology **from the city**" on the other hand leads to a shift in focus from rural-urban contradictions to the contradictions between industrialisation and commodification processes versus the reproduction of life. Two types of space correspond to this distinction, which is found in Lefebvrian's theoretical perspectives on the production of urban space and the right to the city. This approach also examines hybrid and transitional territories, where economic activities and lifestyles associated with so-called antagonistic universes coexist, such as urban and rural, or urban and nature.

Last but not least, the agroecology that typically emerges in more urbanised contexts involves a great diversity of subjects and actors, and dialogues with the specificities of these contexts. The concept brings the understanding that nature is or must be closely integrated with built-up spaces. Nature composes and consolidates the production of urban space in these territories. According to the concept of the right to the city, it is seen as a collective work, which can and should be transformed by the practices of those who live in it. In this sense, urban agroecology involves the creation and appropriation of the city by people who do not necessarily have a rural past or rural ties, but who come from diverse professional occupations. From this confluence other knowledges emerge and influence practices. Traditional knowledge aligns with technologies and knowledges specific to the urban, generating social innovation and developing other consumption-production arrangements.

Towards urban agroecology!

The growing strength of the urban agriculture movement has provided recognition of different agricultural histories and practices in urban territories, and extended the



Victory's Flavour Urban Farm located in the São Mateus neighbourhood in São Paulo. Photo by André Biazoti

possibilities of relating the urban population with nature and agriculture. Urban agriculture and agroecology may help create the principles and dimensions of an agroecological approach to productive systems, social subjects and urban territories. We can term it "urban agroecology".

However, not all experiences of urban agriculture incorporate agroecological principles. This new field must also understand cities as territories of dispute between social movements engaged in the promotion of life, and the capitalist industrial food system. It is necessary to move forward by laying aside the false dichotomy between urban and rural, and to identify that there is a common interest in valuing land through the productive use of spaces essential to the reproduction of life.

Daniela Adil Oliveira de Almeida

PhD, Post-doctoral Fapemig Researcher, Urban Agriculture Study Group – AUÊ! (IGC/UFGM)
daniadil.aue@gmail.com

André Ruoppolo Biazoti

MSc Master Student in Applied Ecology Programme (USP);
 Urban Agriculture Study Group - GEAU (IEA/USP)
andrebiazoti@gmail.com

References

- Almeida, D.A.O. de. *Isto e aquilo: agriculturas e produção do espaço na Região Metropolitana de Belo Horizonte (RMBH)*. Belo Horizonte: 2016. 438p. Tese (Doutorado) - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), 2016.
- Lefebvre, H. *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.
- McClintock, Nathan. *Radical, reformist, and garden-variety neoliberal: coming to terms with urban agriculture's contradictions*. *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, v. 19, p. 2, p. 147-171, 2014.