

Urban Agroecology as a way forward for Urban Agriculture?

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Agroecology is a dynamic and inspiring concept that has gained prominence in scientific, agricultural and political discourses in recent years. It is increasingly considered as a promising approach that can contribute to transforming food systems by applying ecological principles to agriculture and ensuring a regenerative use of natural resources and ecosystem services while also addressing the need for socially equitable food systems within which people can exercise choice over what they eat and how and where it is produced.

However, agroecology is not a straightforward concept and its most satisfactory interpretation is contested. The most commonly used definition of agroecology is 'the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems' (Altieri, 1995). Furthermore, the concept of agroecology has evolved both as a scientific discipline and also through farmers' practices that preserve the resilience and the ecological, socioeconomic and cultural sustainability of food systems and, additionally, as a bottom-up social movement of farmers and other practitioners across the globe who have collectively defined what the main principles of agroecology are.

Although agroecology has been on the policy agenda for a considerable time, it is in the last 5-10 years that it has received increasing attention and debate as a promising approach in food systems transformation. In this, the debate on agroecology has been broadened in a number of ways. First, from a strongly rural-centred concept, associated with grass-roots movements of small farmers and peasants, agroecology is now mentioned in several high-level publications and in international debates (see, for example, HLPE, 2019 and the 10 or 13 principles published by FAO and SDC¹). These frameworks emphasise its potential contribution to the transition to resilient food systems, and the importance of integration, diversification, building agency and stakeholder engagement. Urban Agroecology has clearly become a key topic in debates on the future of sustainable agriculture and food systems².

Second, the agroecology approach has gradually gained attention in debates on urban agriculture and urban planning. The idea of urban agroecology, as introduced in the aforementioned UA Magazine 33, has received much support, but at the same time it is apparent that much

still has to be done to truly connect the areas of urban development, agriculture and agroecology. Pothukuchi and Kaufman's (2000) observation that "the food system is a stranger to the planning field" is still largely true twenty years later. Although there is considerable reference to urban agroecology, in practice the policy areas of urban planning and the development of sustainable urban agriculture remain fragmented and largely disconnected.

It remains open to discussion how political agroecology should be interpreted and what system changes are involved. In addition, agroecology and other regenerative approaches remain contested, and are still viewed by many as 'alternative' and sometimes as in direct opposition to conventional farming. In addition the dominant agricultural policies that lack an understanding of added value or true cost calculations place barriers to agroecology.

There is a need to be more comprehensive, find connections and establish concrete ways to advance urban agroecology. An interesting building block for this was developed by The Global Alliance of the Future of Food (GAFF) who critically assessed the viability, profitability, scalability and the evidence available for agroecological approaches. This GAFF compendium³ provides insights into the available evidence and knowledge and "tackles the narratives and questions that undermine action and mislead the public about what's possible". A major lesson is that "the evidence in support of agroecology, regenerative approaches, and Indigenous foodways exists in a battleground — one of many over knowledge and power".

The GAFF compendium assesses this evidence based on five questions, whether agroecology (and similar frameworks) can: feed the world; achieve scale; support meaningful livelihoods; solve the climate, biodiversity and soil crises; and whether they are important in food systems transformation. To do justice to this would go beyond the space available here, but the following promising angles are worth exploring further:

¹ <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/our-approach/principles/>

² For more on this, see [Issue 33 of the Urban Agriculture Magazine](#)

³ <https://story.futureoffood.org/the-politics-of-knowledge/>

- Measuring performance and resilience through a systems lens to show the multifunctional benefits of these approaches.
- Successful upscaling is happening right now. Social movements are key forces for change and participatory and multi-actor approaches are crucial.
- These approaches generate higher levels of stability in income and employment than other forms of production — and without depending on subsidies or incentive measures.
- Systemic problems require systemic solutions. The dynamism and inherent capacity of agroecology, regenerative approaches and indigenous foodways enhances climate and ecological resilience.
- Systems transformation is heavily linked to challenging the deep structures of the status quo. This opens up the discussion around food sovereignty and agency, highlighting the ways that governance, at all levels, plays a critical role in accelerating or hindering agroecological transitions.

Urban agroecology provides an interesting framework to better understand and design sustainable urban and regional food systems. Further exploring this with cities around the world and documenting concrete experiences with putting urban agroecology into practice will prove valuable.

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More information

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- European Association for Agroecology: <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/our-approach/principles/>
- HLPE. (2019). Report no.14. *Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition*. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>
- Pothukuchi, K., & Kaufman, J.L. (2000). The Food System, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 66:2, 113-124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360008976093>
- The GAFF compendium. <https://story.futureoffood.org/the-politics-of-knowledge/>

The Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture Sourcebook: From production to food systems



The global population is estimated to reach 9.7 billion by 2050, 70 percent of whom will be living in urban areas. This rapid process of urbanisation and population growth will directly lead to increasing numbers of people to feed in cities, while indirectly leading to a rise in unhealthy diets and consequent health issues such as overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases. At the same time, the population suffering from food insecurity and malnutrition is on the rise. Currently, more than 700 million people are experiencing severe food insecurity of whom the majority are located in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia.

Urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) is increasingly recognised as a key component of building the resilience of local food systems as it diversifies food value chains, improves the livelihood of city dwellers, and brings about multiple benefits for sustainable urban development through local food production and shorter supply chains. Growing research and increasing awareness of the variety of production systems and practices in many cities and regions is bringing to light the significant contributions made by UPA, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

FAO, Rikolto and RUAF, with a key contribution from Ryerson University, launched the "Urban and peri-urban agriculture sourcebook: from production to food systems" publication. This catalogues, organises and analyses various existing UPA typologies, cases and examples at the global level. The aim is to set out key lessons and provide guidance for a diverse range of actors involved in local food systems, particularly decision-makers, planners and practitioners responsible for planning and implementing UPA schemes.

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