

European policies on Urban Agriculture: state-of-the-art, limitations and opportunities

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An EFUA review of EU policy areas and instruments concludes that urban agriculture is not currently on the radar as a European policy issue. This article makes the case for the various types of urban agriculture to be actively addressed in a slate of EU policies and strategies, for the multifunctional benefits to be harnessed for true food systems transformation.

There has been considerable and growing interest in urban agriculture (UA) and its multiple benefits over the last decade. Various projects and networks have emerged within and between cities. Examples of such (inter) national multi-city networks are the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, the Eurocities Working Group Food, and national networks in the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy. Amongst these networks and projects, UA increasingly appears as a promising approach to green the city whilst also contributing to food production and the development of a city's identity¹. UA and urban gardening initiatives also have potential to contribute to a better quality of life and social cohesion.

At the European level, however, UA seems not (yet) to be on the radar as a national and transnational European policy issue. At the EFUA² FACTS! Conference of March 2022, it was highlighted how UA (even when clearly present in narratives and visual presentations) is not mentioned explicitly in relevant new EU policies or strategies, such as the Farm-to-Fork (F2F) Strategy. Additionally, UA is not (yet) an explicit category in the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Agricultural policies tend to focus on rural areas, thereby neglecting the capacity of UA to contribute to food production and other important goals and challenges of European agriculture.

Mapping of EU policies

To date, hardly any studies have investigated how UA is addressed in policies at the European Union (EU) level. Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge on how current

policies could potentially support UA and, in return, contribute to different EU policy goals and challenges. To address this gap, the EFUA project mapped selected EU policy areas and policy instruments that are relevant to UA, and identified those that could be used to support UA practice³.

First, the EFUA team considered the most important policy areas when discussing UA within EU. For this, the EU's own definition of policy areas was used, i.e. specific thematic areas where the EU can act because the member countries have authorised it to do so, via the EU treaties⁴. On the basis of expert interviews, five EU policy areas were identified as priorities: Public health, Agriculture, Environment, Territorial Cohesion, and Research and Innovation.

For these policy areas, the team drew on expert knowledge and document analysis to research the following further questions:

- Within the area, are there already policy instruments that address UA?
- What are the main and specific objectives of the policy instrument?
- Who are the key stakeholders involved?
- What are the funding tools?
- How is UA addressed within the identified instrument?

This exercise demonstrated that UA is still very much neglected at the EU policy level. Within the five key policy



Figure 1: Selected EU policy areas

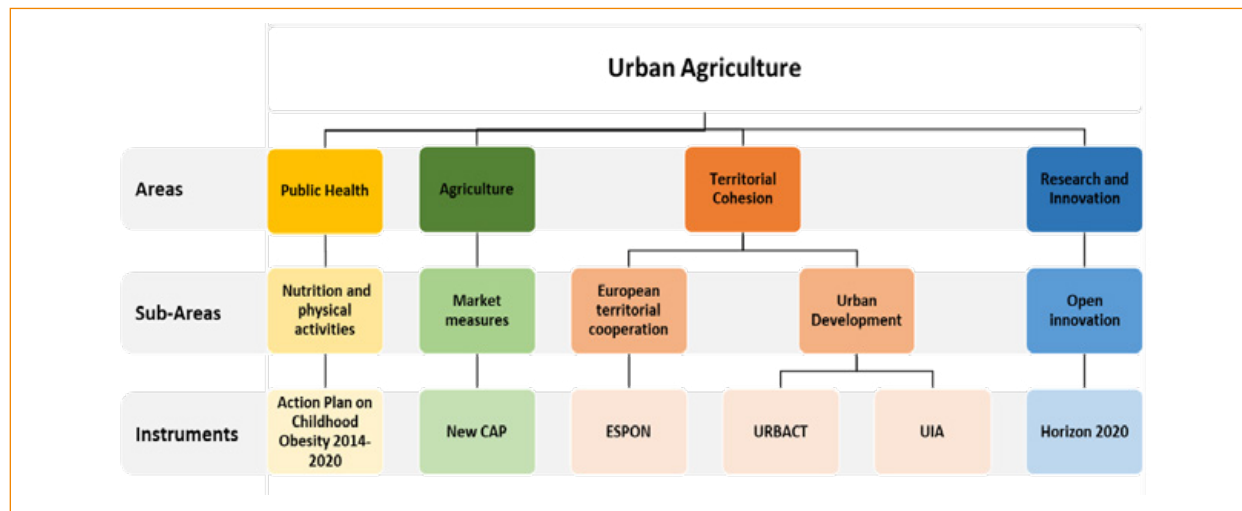


Figure 2: Existing policy instruments for Urban Agriculture in relevant EU policy areas

areas, UA is never explicitly mentioned in any policy instrument's objectives. Rather, when UA is addressed, it is indirectly through UA-related activities implemented through specific funded projects.

Moreover, existing policy instruments related to UA, and to urban food systems more generally, are highly isolated and fragmented. There is no clear, overarching integrated vision of UA that gives direction to policy instruments across different areas. Clearly there is a big gap between the daily UA experiences of producers and citizens for whom UA is a local and urban-driven reality on the one hand, and higher levels, such as the EU, that do not yet adequately recognise it, on the other.

Specific policy areas: opportunities and limitations

A further look at some examples of policy instruments gives a more fine-grained picture of the current policy landscape and its limitations in promoting UA's potential

(see Figure 2), and is a basis for suggestions of possible new or improved policy instruments (see Figure 3).

For the policy area **Public Health**, the Action Plan on Childhood Obesity includes a number of intervention areas to which UA could be relevant under "contributing to halting the rise in overweight and obesity in children and young people (0-18 years) by 2020". For example, interventions to "promote a healthier environment, especially at school and pre-school" might include establishing school-based food gardens. The intervention area to "inform and empower families to increase the intake of healthy foods (fruits and vegetables, milk, water) among parents and children in local communities" is also relevant; the EU encourages implementing direct-to-consumer marketing outlets such as farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture, and promotes home food production through rooftop/balcony gardens, school raised bed gardens and planting fruit trees in parks,

schools grounds, urban streetscapes, and waste-ground areas to encourage free picking and fresh fruit consumption.

For the **Agriculture** policy area, EFUA research identified UA-related activities in the fruit, vegetable and milk scheme, financed under the CAP. This produce might be provided by urban farms and other local producers, and the scheme also supports school gardens. These measures address CAP objective 9 (Responding to societal demands on food & health).

In other CAP objectives to which UA clearly could contribute, it is not acknowledged. For example, objective 1 aims to "enhance long-term food security and agricultural diversity, as well as to ensure the economic sustainability of agricultural production". To this end EU farmers can receive income support as 'direct payment' in support of this objective but UA producers are, in most cases, excluded. This is often due to not meeting minimum farm size (0.3 to 5 hectares depending on the EU country), and not performing a clearly defined agricultural activity on land registered as agricultural area, a difficult condition to meet in urban areas. Moreover, even if they were to receive direct payments, UA farmers would receive very little because the payments are calculated on the basis of area eligible land. Soilless production on non-agricultural land (rooftops, vertical farming, small-scale inner-city farms etc.) would be excluded from support.

The 'second pillar' of the CAP, covering territorial support programmes, potentially has more opportunities for UA. Although UA can clearly have important environmental and social benefits, farming in the second CAP pillar is still strongly considered a rural domain. However, these benefits should not be confined to rural settings only, and environmental and social benefits derived from UA practices should be guaranteed to everyone, including urban citizens and producers. Rural Development Programmes (RDs) could also better integrate relevant UA activities. RDs depend on national regulation and national territorial delimitations, which can exclude urban areas for parts of RDP measures. If agriculture in urban areas were eligible for RDs, UA could make use of some good existing measures, for example for supporting regional value chains and cooperative market arrangements. Therefore, UA should be directly reflected in future strategic planning regulations and not excluded by the specific limitation of land as "rural". Agriculture should be considered as such regardless of location, and equal benefits promoted in both rural and urban areas.

In relation to the CAP, three other policy instruments can be used to further develop UA and benefit policy agendas: the local development programme LEADER⁵, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), and European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-Agri) programmes (see Figure 3). The

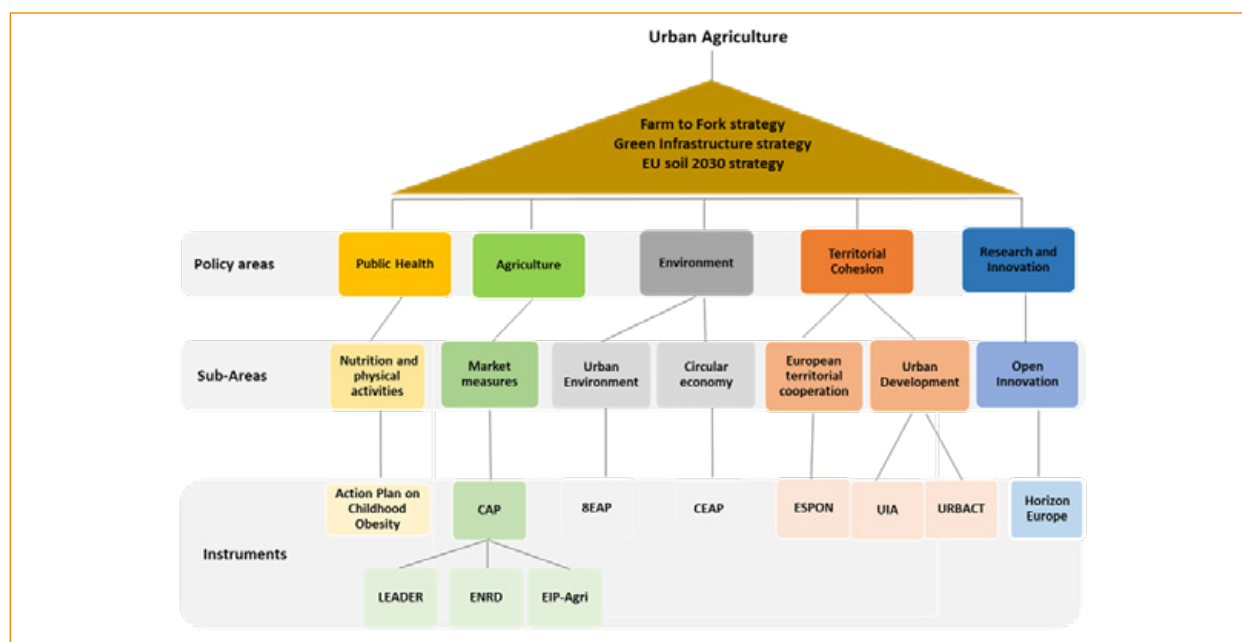


Figure 3: Policy map with identified and proposed instruments that relate to UA

community-based approach of LEADER bottom-up development and funding would be well-suited for UA programmes, which often have a strong community component, especially when these could be implemented across urban-rural divides and strengthen regional linkages.

The ENRD serves as an exchange hub for information on how Rural Development policy, programmes, projects and other initiatives work in practice, and how they can be improved. While ENRD does not provide direct funding, there are good opportunities to address relevant topics for UA in information exchange and RDP improvement activities, including supporting a more balanced role of UA in RDs.

Lastly, the EIP-Agri programme could play a stronger role in developing UA. EIP-Agri was created to bridge the gap between the innovative solutions created by researchers and the uptake of new technologies by the agricultural sector, such as by creating partnerships (Operational Groups) that bring together multiple actors such as farmers, researchers, advisors, businesses, environmental groups, consumer interest groups or other NGOs to advance innovation. EIP-Agri Operational Groups must contribute to the overall objective of promoting agricultural innovation that is more resource efficient, productive, low emission, climate-friendly, and resilient, and that operates in harmony with the natural resources on which farming is based. Different types of UA initiatives can clearly address these objectives. There have already been some EIP-Agri groups relevant for strengthening UA including on topics such as Circular Horticulture, New entrants into farming, and Innovative short food supply chain management.

For the **Environment** policy area, no policy instruments that explicitly address UA activities were identified. At the same time, it is clear that UA has important potential environmental benefits, and there are opportunities to address UA in policy programmes such as the 8th Environmental Action Programme (8EAP), the new Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP), the climate and energy actions as part of the Green Deal and the EU Soil Strategy for 2030.

Additionally, the EU Strategy on Green Infrastructure (GI) might be relevant for UA. It aims at developing, preserving and enhancing healthy green infrastructure to help stop the loss of biodiversity and enable the delivery of ecosystem services to people and nature. Although it evolved from nature conservation, the GI Strategy is now more connected to the human scale and the human needs. UA provides similar benefits and can therefore be regarded as an important element of GI. There may also be promise in using GI strategies as a vehicle for better policies in UA, as GI connects UA in the larger discussions about Green Cities and Ecosystem Services.

The policy area **Territorial Cohesion** currently has several policy programmes supporting UA. These especially aim at funding exchange and learning programmes between territorial and urban development programmes in cities and regions across Europe. An example is the URBACT programme, aimed at promoting sustainable urban development that integrates economic, social and environmental dimensions and at improving the capacity of cities to manage urban policy for this. Through URBACT, several exchange projects relevant for UA policy development have been funded, such as RU:RBAN and Agri-Urban.

RU:RBAN aimed at transferring Rome's management models of Urban regeneration and social inclusion through urban gardens to a cohort of other European cities. Specifically, the cities exchange knowledge on: 1) urban gardens capacity building 2) governance, and 3) education about gardens management (Gardeniser)⁵. Agri-Urban aimed to "create a European network of small and medium-sized cities, with a potential for creating jobs in their rural or peri-urban areas, through an integrated approach, combining the social and environmental dimensions of agriculture in an innovative way"⁶.

Other relevant support programmes for the Territorial Cohesion policy area are Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) and ESPON 2000. The UIA programme finances projects that test new and innovative solutions to address urban challenges in European Cities. Many initiatives financed by UIA have used UA-related activities to address their goals. The ESPON 2020 programme finances policy-relevant research with the overall objective of reinforcing the effectiveness of EU Cohesion. Many projects within ESPON have addressed UA, including the GRETA project aimed at promoting GI for territorial development⁷.

For the policy area **Research & Innovation**, different projects funded under the Horizon 2020 research & innovation programme have covered UA-related activities, and supported the development of learning and exchange networks between city governments, universities and research institutes. This includes projects like: FoodTrails, FoodSHIFT2030, FoodE and the FUSILLI project, as well as the EFUA project. Various of these projects include UA cases, although there is no explicit exchange on this topic. Rather, projects focus on wider urban food systems and urban food policy approaches, and within which the role of UA is not always obvious.

Towards integrated support for urban food systems, incl. urban agriculture?

The review makes it clear that EU policies for UA are still very fragmented and incomplete. While relevant actions do exist in some policy areas, they remain isolated. There is no overall, integrated policy for UA.

On the positive side, EU policies are shifting towards more integrated, less sectoral approaches to food system

policies with the development of integrating, thematic policy strategies, such as the F2F Strategy, the GI Strategy and the EU Soil Strategy. The F2F Strategy is a particularly important development, and in the context of which a new European Food System Framework (or even Law) is foreseen. That said, it is still very unclear how far UA will be explicitly included in F2F and the Food System Framework – even though it is clear that UA is very relevant for its goals (as well as the goals of the Green Deal). Until now, the EU Food System approaches favour elements such as food environments, food procurement schemes and food waste – that is, areas on the consumer side of the food system. While these food system elements are certainly relevant, for a really transformative approach to food systems it is vital that the various different types of UA be addressed, and the huge potential benefits be acknowledged.

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4. European Commission (2023) Aeres of EU-Action https://ec.europa.eu/info/about-european-commission/what-european-commission-does/law/areas-eu-action_en
5. LEADER stands for 'Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale', meaning 'Links between the rural economy and development actions'.
6. RU:RBAN Urban agriculture for resilient cities <https://urbact.eu/networks/rurban>
7. AGRI-URBAN The roots of the city <https://urbact.eu/networks/agri-urban>
8. GRETA - Green infrastructure: Enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem services for territorial development <https://www.espon.eu/green-infrastructure>