



When urban agriculture meets food justice...



Urban agriculture is fashionable in developed countries and its boasts a rather positive image of community development. But how do these promises hold? In order to answer the question, researchers from Portland State University and the University of Michigan carried out a review of existing evidence in the United States and Canada. Their objective was to better map out the relationships between urban agriculture and food justice, defined as “the right of communities everywhere to produce, process, distribute, access and eat good food regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, ability, religion or community”.

Their work shows that scientific evidence remains patchy and that urban agriculture is such a diverse phenomenon that it is difficult to draw clear cut conclusions. However, the review unveils opens up two areas for action for any city: that of protecting urban agriculture, and that of using it as a stepping stone for empowerment.

How does urban agriculture benefit disadvantaged people?

In a nutshell, **for urban agriculture to yield positive outcomes, it needs to be part of a wider array of policies that enable disadvantaged people to access land and find the time to cultivate it.** In other words, urban agriculture is not a silver bullet.

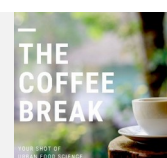
On the one side, urban agriculture can increase food access, and therefore, food security, for disadvantaged people. For instance, one case study in Seattle showed that participants in community gardens usually produce up to 40% of the fresh produce they need, hence saving the money they would have otherwise spent. Gardening can also yield health benefits, as it is easier to access fresh and healthy food, and it reduces stress, increases mental well-being, and even offers some form of exercise.

On the other side, existing evidence also points to factors that can limit such benefits. These are, for example, the fact that growing your own requires land, time, and gardening skills, and that for some households, it can be very difficult to access land or find the time to garden in tight schedules. Moreover, it is not clear if the health benefits associated with urban agriculture can override the structural factors (such as, for instance, income inequalities) that explain health differences between social groups.

What does urban agriculture bring to disadvantaged communities?

If we zoom out from the people to look at their communities, here again, the evidence about the links between urban agriculture and food justice has two facets.

Some research show positive links between participation in urban agriculture projects and wider community benefits such as lower crime rates or increased voter registration. In the same vein, some initiatives show that urban agriculture can be a relevant development strategy for low-income



neighbourhoods. A good example of this is the [Growing Power project](#), in Milwaukee and Chicago (USA), that employs local people to grow food. But these examples remain scarce, and urban farms usually face difficulties to generate a steady income, making it difficult for them to create good-paid and secure jobs.

However, at the same time, analysis points out the risks of gentrification that comes along with urban agriculture projects, as they attract young, higher-income households to low-income neighbourhoods.

If it is to contribute to food justice, urban agriculture needs to be protected

Taking stock on this somewhat contrasted evidence, the researchers then reflect upon the ways in which urban agriculture could better contribute to food justice. A central point for them is that for urban agriculture to play a bigger role in food justice, it first needs to be strengthened.

Indeed, urban agriculture is very fragile. A great number of gardens rely on non permanent tenure rights, and they are only welcome in the city while waiting for other urban developments. Great urban agriculture projects (such as community farms) producing positive social impacts can disappear very quickly.

Urban planners should therefore seek to create a secure environment, by protecting land in lower-income neighbourhoods for urban agriculture activities. The city of Seattle, for instance, has made public land available for urban agriculture.

Urban agriculture as a stepping stone for empowerment?

If urban agriculture cannot by itself tackle all structural barriers to food poverty, it can at least be used as a stepping stone to empower disadvantaged communities.

There is one structural barriers that cities can help alleviate, though, through urban agriculture policy. That is the lack of voice of the disadvantaged people in policy. **Cities should create opportunities for food justice organisations to take part in urban agriculture policy making.** This would enable their voice to be heard. This could take the form of an Urban Agriculture Advisory Board that would gather representatives from very diverse backgrounds, including food justice organisations, to advise the city on strategic orientations for its urban agriculture policy. This could contribute to targeting funding and resources to those who have less. It would also allow cities to design support schemes that support urban agriculture and, at the same time, social progress. And avoid developing tax reduction schemes that favour property owners, or, even worse, could contribute to gentrification. The City of Seattle is now using a systematic equity lens on all its food actions in order to assess who benefits from the money it invests in such projects.

Therefore, although it will not by itself solve food justice issues, urban agriculture has a role to play in contributing to a fairer future.

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Source

[Horst, M., McClintock, N., Hoey, L. \(2017\) "The Intersection of Planning, Urban Agriculture, and Food Justice: A Review of the Literature", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 83:3, pp.277-295](#)

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