

Promoting farmer innovation in urban areas

Not in my Backyard?

The rural search for farmer innovators evolves to the urban context. Food insecurity, unemployment, social exclusion, and other societal ills are attacked simultaneously, as creative farmers act progressively in their urban agricultural pursuits. Urban farmers – and especially local innovators – hold the key to the future of agricultural policy, extending from the rural setting to include the rapidly expanding urban environment. What is needed now is more support by imaginative bi-lateral agencies and inspired policy-makers: there are signs that it is just beginning to happen.

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Photo: Rutt

40 percent of Kampala City residents practice urban agriculture.

Perhaps you have heard about an existing approach that promotes the harnessing of «farmer innovators», to address rural agricultural concerns of all varieties? Tried and tested for about 15 years now in East Africa, it has proven successful in countering issues of soil conservation, land degradation and other environmental difficulties through the utilization of indigenous, and ingenious, knowledge of farmers. Under this approach, men and women not only share their locally innovative solutions, but some also make the transition into the role of teacher and disseminator. The key here is the term «local». This does not involve complex issues of intellectual property rights but provides simple, clever remedies to problems that developed over time through low-cost experimentation, and without expensive inputs (particularly from poor farmers). This kind of participatory practice is now favored among development actors, as it recognizes the inherent long-term effectiveness of locally produced solutions that are supported by scientists, in place of a general, Western-derived panacea. Yet this search for «innovators» in the local sense is something that is not widespread, although it is highly significant to progressive policy making.

Why do innovators hold the key to effective, sustainable agricultural policy formulation? Last month, I took the Promoting Farmer Innovation framework to the

urban context (Critchley, W. et al. (1999): *Promoting Farmer Innovation: Harnessing Local Environmental Knowledge in East Africa*. Regional Land Management Unit, Relma/Sida, ICRAF House, Gigiri: Nairobi). On a study of local innovations within urban agriculture in Kampala, Uganda, I discovered a lot more than anticipated, not only from the farmers themselves (a typically creative lot) but also within the government.

Kampala is on its way to becoming a success story, and is already an exemplary model for other developing urban centers. This is due to the government's recognition of the many contributions of urban producers to city dwellers as a whole, as well as the way that it has embraced its own cultural heritage of agriculture. Figures state that 40 percent of Kampala City residents practice urban agriculture in some form. At present, Uganda is attempting to create a national policy framework, one that can follow its unique path, and one does not mimic the «ideals of Western urban mythology».

Innovations in an edible landscape

Dr. Shuaib Lwasa, a lecturer at Kampala's Makerere University, describes Kampala as an interesting «fusion of ideals from the North and the culture of the South», uniting to «breed a new urban form». He

is part of a project, in partnership with the Kampala City Council and the International Development Research Center of Canada among others, called the Kyanja Edible Landscapes (KELP). Taking place in a former dumping site (one that soil tests revealed contains minimal contamination levels), KELP is an urban agricultural low cost housing initiative, and utilizes the wants, needs and recommendations of local urban farmers. KELP is committed to the achievement of one of the UN Millennium Goals: «Eradicating Hunger and Poverty by 2015». Participating farmers were selected according to specific criteria that included those in the low-income bracket and those currently facing land restrictions that inhibit their farming activities.

Kampala's recognized farmer innovators (as identified by NGOs, academic and government stakeholders) are central to the designing of this residential district, and many have been approached to take leadership roles in this project. The major aim of KELP is to integrate urban agriculture (UA) into urban development and designs, one that incorporates regulated and organized crop production and the raising of livestock, all within the Kampala City boundaries. This is possible only because UA has been legalized and regulated, a reflection of the positive outcome of progressive agricultural policy formulation, and one in which innovators take center stage.

Cabbage and cows

Urban Agriculture may be a stall-fed dairy cow in a semi-detached suburb, maize and beans growing on a roadside verge, or vegetables at the back of the house fed by kitchen wastewater. Urban agriculture grows with the city, and plays a vital role within the urban structure. Highly significant today, it is an important source of nutrition and income for many people in the developing world, and in many ways contributes positively to the current problem of rural to urban migration. Estimates suggest that around 50 percent of the world's population currently resides in cities, and this will swell to approximately 65 percent within the next 20 years. The majority of movement will occur in developing world regions that lack adequate infrastructure and often experience political and economic instability. This large-scale migration has several impacts. One conspicuous example is that since rural habitants provide the rest of the population with food through their agricultural activities, as they leave the countryside, the amount of food produced there drops as the number of hungry mouths in the cities increases.

Another problem is the health impact of urban spread. Many people newly arrived in cities do not have stable employment or money to pay metropolitan prices for shelter and utilities. They often form extensive slums that surround a city, and without many basic services like proper sanitation and water access, disease spreads and environmental damage occurs. UN-HABITAT estimates indicate that in 2001, 924 million people, or 31.6 percent of the world's urban population, lived in slums. In developing regions, slum dwellers account for 43 percent of the urban population, compared to 6 percent of the urban population in developed regions. Africa had 187 million slum dwellers (20% of the world's total). It is projected that in the next 30 years, the number of slum dwellers worldwide will increase to 2 billion if no firm or concrete action is taken to arrest the situation (UN-Habitat: Millennium Development Goals. <http://www.unhabitat.org/mdg/>).

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Urban agriculture is already recognized as a major contribution to the health of the city's citizens and environment, income stability, food security, and social inclusion of women and youth among other aspects. Incorporation of UA policy into the guidelines of a city can have dramatically constructive effects on the way that agriculture is practiced in cities, and to the overall enhancement of its many existing contributions.

Innovations, agricultural policy and urban planning: Go!

Margaret Azuba-Semwanga of the Kampala City Council notes that while urban agriculture was once a «No-Go» area, now it has become a «Go!» area. Why? Because those at the top of the policy-making ladder are recognizing that innovations, for one thing, reduce repetitiveness (that may perpetuate inefficient habits and practices). In the constant search for best methods – for example, «How Best can I grow herbs on my veranda?» and «How Best can I raise this heifer?» – authorities are impressed. It is through this evolution that important figures such as the Mayor

of Kampala and Uganda's President Museveni have now incorporated urban agriculture into their Mandates. Margaret Azuba emphasizes that without the evidence of evolution in urban agriculture, resulting in growth and improvement for practitioners and consumer alike, those at the top would not have been inclined to integrate UA into their official plans for Uganda.

Avoiding the «Ideals of Western Urban Mythology»

Progressive urban planning and agricultural policy must reflect spatial changes, and take into consideration the rising demand for locally produced food to stay abreast of rapid population growth. An evolving city of the developing world cannot ignore their personal cultural identity, and planners will face an uphill battle if they attempt to implement the modern

Western city's strict lines and general rigidity. This mythology of urban superiority has inhibited growth for too long, restricted by redundant colonial-era planning laws. Growth then is only achievable when those at the top recognize the benefits of organized, regulated UA and put it on the agenda. I questioned some of those responsible for policy making in Kampala what their thoughts were on UA, and I was given interesting responses.

Florence Mukasa Namayanja, Kampala Deputy Mayor and City Minister for Production and Marketing recognizes that urban agriculture must be legalized to protect the people from harassment – «as they will do it regardless of legal status, yet simultaneously it is the job of law enforcement officers to act against illegal activities». The Deputy Mayor also mentions the value of UA for food security and income generation.

Winnie Makumbi, Chairman of the Lubaga Division, ex-City Minister for Gender, Welfare and Community Services of Kampala District, was an instrumental force in the UA Ordinances passed just last year. She notes, «We shouldn't ban this just to become like other cities». Agriculture should be recognized as part of the Ugandan culture, whether occurring in the rural environment or in the cities, and it also must be regulated again because people will do it despite of illegal status.

These promising reactions display Kampala's progressive tendency, one that does not deny Uganda's unique qualities for agriculture – rich, fertile soils combined

with a good climate – and instead incorporates a holistic understanding of what will benefit all city-dwellers.

A new national policy for urban agriculture

An urban farmer working at the Ministry of Agriculture, John Muwanga, explains the current political climate within the Ministries by mentioning the fact that as rising energy prices is now the «hot topic» in Uganda, the Ministry of Agriculture is experiencing a substantial budget cut. Nonetheless, John Muwanga is hopeful that the National Policy guiding urban agriculture for all of the urban centers in Uganda will be finalized and in effect by next year.

Who is to form the foundation of this policy? When asked if the Ministry is keen to discover the opinions on agricultural policy of Ugandan urban farmers themselves, John Muwanga replied affirmatively, and when subsequently questioned on how the Ministry would obtain such information, he responded that the Ministry would utilize NGOs such as «Environmental Alert».

«Environmental Alert» is the 2005 recipient of the prestigious Energy Globe. Housing the PROLINNOVA (PROmoting Local INNOVation) project of Uganda, it has shifted focus from exclusively rural to urban innovators as well, and is a major force for the inclusion of urban agriculture in the Plan for the Modernization of Agriculture. Environmental Alert is currently conducting countrywide research on farmer recommendations, to formulate a comprehensive policy Proposal for the National Policy on Urban Agriculture. Innovators are of particular interest, as they hold the most progressive, evolutionary suggestions for best-practice urban farming procedures.

Farmer Innovators – holding the key to agro-policy success

Some of the urban farmers of Kampala are not only efficient, intelligent and determined, they are also demonstrated innovators. Mabel Bikandema, an innovating farmer in the Makindye Division of Kampala, produces compost from all of the organic matter that originates on her farm and in her household. To supplement her own source of biodegradable mass, Mabel Bikandema regularly visits the produce market, where she pays boys around 2,000 shillings (about 30 US cents) to collect discarded organic matter – cabbage stems, bananas peels, animal droppings, etc. – and take it to her home. There, it is



An example of technical innovation: Jolly Nalubega's «Mushroom House» in the Slums of Kampala.

Photos: Rutt

added to the compost heap, which is then bagged and sold to other farmers. In doing so, Mabel Bikandema improves the environmental health of her community by removing a source of waste. She also provides employment to local youth, and most importantly, generates something positive from something negative, or what would have been otherwise useless. Another farmer, Ms. Jolly Nalubega, has operated a mushroom house in the slums since 1992. This almost undetectable 1 meter by 3 meter enclosed corridor, wedged between two slum homes, runs so efficiently that it provides her with her entire income.

I also found a school that works with parents in a marketing co-operative, for the production and sale of orange-fleshed sweet potatoes with revenues going towards a community «priority list», as well as a community women's group that co-manages a highly nutritious and profitable fishpond. Also discovered: a school that shares excess land with local farmers in a mutually beneficial relationship, and a free school (for the poorest children) funded by homegrown crops – with the students' participation – through the sale of wines, jams, juices and cakes made using indigenous knowledge and recipes. It is the remarkable innovations that catch the eye and focus the interest of authorities; therefore the search for innovators in agriculture can have great impacts on the developing world. Pross Owino, an agricultural officer working in the area, notes that these innovations also take the heat off of community plan-



ners by reducing their workload. Planners can operate in a city that has creative citizens doing the work for them. They have less issues of waste management and space problems to handle, and are even able to learn lessons from these innovators that are applicable to other urban centers in Uganda.

Innovation is an exciting new idea that has shown great promise in rural agriculture. It is also the backbone of urban agriculture. UA is a practice that simply has not received any outside help until just recently; thus it has been obliged to rely heavily on local innovation for mere survival.

A previously overlooked area (with focus almost exclusively on the rural environment), urban agriculture is currently being appraised and appreciated for the first time. The unnoticed mechanism, the innovative individual, is what I now propose we focus our energy on. This often disregarded livelihood strategy, urban farming, has terrific potential to improve the urban environment, to raise people out of poverty, to better the world in which we all live, and it is the recognition of farmer innovators that will effortlessly lead the way to our healthy future global home. Innovative attitudes to urban agriculture in planning are beginning to emerge, and development initiatives will benefit immensely from the full accommodation of farmer innovation as a source of inspiration.

The author

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