

Urban agriculture key to alleviating world hunger

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The urban poor have been hit the hardest by the global hunger epidemic, which has been fueled by the ongoing food, economic, financial, and environmental crises.

Getting healthy food into cities in sufficient quantities is an extremely difficult task. For the first time in the history of mankind, over half the world's population lives in cities. Reached in 2007, that portion is projected to increase dramatically in the next few decades. About a third of all city dwellers, about one billion people worldwide, live in slums. The cost of importing food from rural areas is too much for many of the urban poor to bear.

For much of this population, growing food is the only way to survive and make a living. The practice of growing plants and raising livestock in empty lots, in pots in homes and on stairways and rooftops, on community land in parks or near water sources, or on small plots of land owned by families makes up a half or more of the food required in some cities in the developing world, particularly in Africa and Asia.

In 2003 alone, 49% of families living within the borders of the Ugandan capital, Kampala, farmed, and most of those families farmed for basic survival and food security. In the early 1990s, 70% of the poultry products consumed in the city were produced inside Kampala.

Food growth in cities is increasing quickly, but not fast enough to keep up with growing urban populations. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has repeatedly called for more attention to the issue and said that urban agriculture is more important than ever in the current food crisis as a source of both nutrients and income.

"Agriculture, especially urban agriculture, has not been given appropriate support for the last 20 years. It is only recently, with the food crisis, that donors and governments in developing countries take seriously how much more help is needed," Remi Nono-Womdin, an agricultural officer at FAO who is in charge of horticulture and vegetable crops, told MediaGlobal.

Nono-Womdin is the lead technical officer of various FAO initiatives on urban and peri-urban (often known as urban fringe) agriculture projects. FAO has worked for many years with city governments and farmers to support urban farming in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, where a joint initiative is underway to support the production of enough fresh vegetables for about 80,000 people to eat and sell.

Urban agriculture plays a critical role in public health in cities during the food crisis, and not just for the large urban portion of the one billion people in the world who live in hunger. Less income means people are less likely to eat healthy foods.

“Higher food prices pushed 115 million people into hunger in 2007 and 2008. The rise in food prices means that people eat less and eat less well. Vulnerable populations switch to cheaper foods that fill them up and ease their hunger, but that are less nutritious,” according to a recent report by the United Nations World Food Programme.

“People who fail to get the correct nutrients and vitamins become more prone to illness, learn less, and have lower productivity. Even a few months of inadequate nutrition could have long-term consequences... for the individual—and offspring—[and] for development and growth prospects of the country as a whole. The cost of hunger is estimated to amount to as much as 11% of GDP in some countries.”

There was a widespread effort among governments and development workers in the 1980s to make growing crops and raising livestock in cities illegal. The spread of disease via the use of contaminated water and human and animal faeces for agriculture made the practice dangerous, so the crackdown was seen as in the best interest of residents.

But in the urban centres of developing countries, people did not stop growing food. While governments have widely given lip service in the years since the 1996 food crisis to the role urban agriculture plays in food security, many have not followed up with supportive policies and funding mechanisms for urban farmers, according to Nono-Womdin.

These efforts are generally not recognised in national agricultural plans, or city layout schemes, in the places that need it the most. Because urban farming has generally taken place entirely on the initiative of farmers who have not been trained in how to grow safely, a lot of the produce that is grown comes from empty land next to railroad lines where people drop garbage and waste right onto the tracks, under main electrical lines, near sewers, by garbage dumps, close to sewage lines, or in places with a lot of chemical waste.

“Farmers need to secure appropriate land for farming, and to do this they need institutional support,” Nono-Womdin said. “Governments of developing countries tell [FAO] the demand for urban agriculture is there. But it's time for governments to transform words into actions.”

For city governments and international donors to enable safe agricultural practices that feed as many people as possible, the FAO has four major recommendations; secure access to quality land and clean water within cities for agriculture, develop and train farmers in safe and sustainable agricultural practices, include urban agricultural development in official national agricultural plans, and secure markets for city-grown produce.

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