From Empty Lots to Productive Spaces in Cienfuegos

Governador Valadares, Brazil

Contribution to the Electronic Conference by Ivana Lovo

The multi-stakeholder policy and action planning process in the city of Valadares focuses on the integration of urban agriculture into municipal land use planning. Several municipal offices (planning, environment, agriculture, building) as well as various civil society organisations participate in this process. Studies during the first phase of the project in Valadares indicated that a substantial amount of land (37% of the total city area) with good agricultural potential is available in the City. This includes vacant public land, backyards; public and private institutional compounds, reservation zones of railroad and highways, banks of rivers and creeks; parks and other green areas; lakes/ponds and a natural reservation area. Nearly one third of the urban households are involved in urban agriculture in an informal net of relations (mainly fruits, vegetables and herbs are grown). The total value of intra-, peripheral and rural-urban agriculture equals 3.17% of the city’s GDP (gross domestic product), of which 1.17% is generated by households in the informal sector. As a result of this process, a system of tax reduction has been introduced to stimulate the access of interested urban poor to the many vacant private plots. Private land owners can sign an agreement with the municipality or an association of community gardeners giving them temporary user rights to their land. The gardeners have to fulfil certain responsibilities and take good care of the land. The private owners receive a reduction in property tax. Apart from the fiscal incentive, the use of the plot provides the owner a guarantee against illegal squatting. A system of differentiation of water tariffs is being developed to promote storage and use of rainwater and grey-water in urban agriculture.

The “Optimisation of Land Use for Urban Agriculture” project (see also the article on Rosario) aims at building local capacity for the inclusion of urban agriculture as a physical planning tool in optimising the use of land and providing food security. It is linked to the Urban Agriculture Programme in the city of Cienfuegos that aims to initiate and improve the use of vacant parcels of land and thereby to strengthen the options for local production of food in the city and its periphery.

THASES OF THE PROJECT

After an initial analysis of available information, the first phase started with a participatory diagnosis in Cienfuegos, using interviews, surveys, a workshop, and capacity-building of the main actors. The data generated during this diagnosis was the basis for developing and subsequent approval of the urban agriculture land use map.

A local team, made up of specialists from different institutions, designed and implemented a Geographical Information System (GIS) which facilitated communication and to give feedback during the fieldwork. The appropriate participatory GIS set-up at the municipal level was studied and further developed throughout the process and adapted to the needs of each phase.

On the basis of this diagnosis, the project areas of the city were selected with the active participation of inhabitants in different neighbourhoods. The work began in four People’s Councils (sub-municipal governmental units: Reina, Pueblo Grifo, La Barrera and Tulipán. Maps for current and potential land use were developed in each of these units, and were presented during an extended workshop to the project team and other local stakeholders.

Efficiency indicators were defined for urban land use, based on suitability and accessibility, and further elaborated into an action plan. A last stage in this first phase of the project included a systematisation workshop, to evaluate the experience, to refine the lessons learned and to make recommendations. This information was used in the proposal for the second phase: the optimisation of the use of vacant land for urban agriculture, which would be part of the municipality’s strategy against poverty and social exclusion.

The second phase of the project – implementation of the Action Plan – included the remaining People Councils with space that could be used: San Lázaro, Buena Vista – La Esperanza, Junco Sur, Pastorita – Obourke. The corresponding land use maps were completed to broaden the knowledge. In addition, this phase included a series of initiatives to communicate the experience gained at local and regional level, like the presentation of the land use maps by the People’s Councils, the creation of multimedia materials, a critical reflection on land regulation, use, and conservation written up in the National Urban Agriculture Programme.

FROM EMPTY LOTS TO PRODUCTIVE SPACES

The optimisation of land use is undertaken...
as a “process of participatory intervention in which the use of vacant land in a certain territory is planned and defined, based on the level of urbanisation, land tenure, property rights, preconceived uses, socio-economic and cultural aspects, and the physical capacity for the practice of sustainable agriculture”. Here, optimisation refers to spatial and temporal use.

This way of “achieving optimal use of vacant land” presupposes improving the quality of life of the population. However, the opportunities differ in most cities of the region, and are the result of a process of differentiated urbanisation and physical planning, which is often incompatible with the fundamental criteria of sustainability.

Another important aspect is that the optimisation of land use is not a passive process of applying geographical and statistical tools, but a very active process. It requires almost an anthropological intervention, which considers a holistic view, characterised by social, economic, environmental, institutional, and political relations. Furthermore, one should be mindful that optimisation could mean that the area in question is not appropriate for agricultural use.

Additionally, urban agriculture should be considered under the General Plan of Territory and Urban Regulation (methodologically under physical planning municipality), as a way to achieve food security, a productive opportunity, and an important activity within the urban ecosystem.

FROM MAPS TO ACTION PLANS

The process of reaching consensus (on the land use maps) was undertaken at three levels: 1) Technical compatibility with the Department of Lands of the Ministry of Agriculture; 2) Compliance with the Directive Plan of the Department of Physical Planning, and 3) Alignment of interests with the People’s Council. The consensus making process resulted in the prospective use of land for urban and periurban agriculture at the level of each Council and its integration into a city-wide strategy. The GIS maps showed vacant spaces of more than 1,000 m². The typology of existing and potential urban spaces is very diverse, and reflects the need for their consideration in planning, as well as tenancy and suitability.

In drawing up the Action Plan, it was necessary to take into account that the National Urban Agriculture Programme has a “sub-programme for the control, use, and conservation of land”, which includes elements of agronomy and a multi-dimensional approach to the use of land.

Although an organised and consolidated planning effort exists, and includes urban agriculture, this can be improved. Especially the local governance and the participatory process need strengthening.

The dynamics of local economics and production generate new areas of need for physical planning and regulation. An illustration is the need to convert plots of land that were formed by the restructuring of the sugar industry in the city. There is a legal and policy framework, as well as a structured procedure for land use management, including different organisational forms of agricultural production with respect to different types of tenancy. However, there is no document that could serve as a guide for the use of spaces, with criteria of efficiency and ecological, economic, social, political and institutional sustainability.

The Action Plan developed for the next phase second phase of the intervention project includes scaling up the experience to all People’s Councils of the municipality and subsequently to other municipalities in the Province. Integration of the (participatory planning) activity at the different levels of administration is one of the challenges of this process.

One of the priority actions is the approval of a policy document for the use of vacant lands in the municipality, which integrates the land use maps elaborated by the People’s Councils. This document should serve as an annexure to the Directive Plan of the Municipality.

Other important activities of the Action Plan include capacity building, dissemination of maps, which at the same time is a validation, launching of agricultural activities on vacant lots by the People’s Councils, establishing of municipal facilities to initiate land use projects for each solicited and granted lot, strengthening of the GIS infrastructure in the Provincial Department of Physical and People-Based Planning and strengthening of technical assistance available for the practice of urban agriculture.

Implementation of the Action Plan is now in an advanced phase, as the land use maps have been completed by the People Councils. Potential plots for urban agriculture have been identified within the city and its periphery. In addition, advances have been made in expanding the existing conceptual and methodological framework for the construction of the maps. The GIS is considered as a support tool in the process of land use management and map making: as a basis and a means for communication in the elaboration of the (current and potential) land use maps, and as a tool for constructing the plans needed to conduct the field work.

CONCLUSIONS

As far as territorial administration or management is concerned, the optimisation of land use should depart from the conceptual and methodological assumption of land use according to the land’s “vocation,” or ideal/best use. Similarly, the Regulatory Land Use Plan should recognise the need to conserve “non-urbanisable” spaces (which are spaces on which cannot be built on) for uses such as urban agriculture. This is fundamental for the inclusion of urban, periurban and rural municipal agriculture in the physical planning process.

This experience has demonstrated the importance of consensus building in land use, not only from the technical point of view or in terms of the use of productive inputs, but also from the ecological, economic, socio-cultural and institutional dimensions. Urban agriculture is an activity, which is guided by the characteristics of a certain agro-ecosystem, but is subject to the complex relationships of urban ecosystems, which can pose problems on its sustainability.

The optimisation of urban land use as a process of participation and multi-sectoral integration provides an opportunity for consensus building and the strengthening of governance.