Experiences from Stakeholder Dialogues in Tamale, Northern Ghana

Tamale is the capital city of Ghana’s Northern Region. As the regional capital, Tamale is growing rapidly—the population has almost tripled to over 370,000 in the past 30 years, and the areal extent has increased up to sevenfold in the same period. Urban agriculture is an integral part of the food system, linked to resource management and spatial planning. In general, one can say that backyard farming flourishes, but more formally organised production is threatened by urbanisation.

The first planning laws, developed in the 1950s, were based on the British 1945 Town and Country Planning Act, while the planning paradigm of the 1970s retained the colonial view that the functions of town and country should be separated spatially. Meanwhile, administrative powers have been devolved to the municipal level as part of the nationwide governmental decentralisation process. In theory, this should provide an opportunity for more involvement of local institutions and organisations in planning processes; yet there is still some way to go. It is necessary to consider not only whether but how participatory planning is enacted.

Despite occasional lack of implementation of urban plans, rapid and often unplanned growth has led, of necessity, to the evolution of a rather functional food system. The traditional Northern Ghanaian staples—maize, yam and rice—still play an important role in urban and peri-urban zones, but vegetable farming is increasing in importance. The Tamale food system links to local and regional food production, along with related nutrient and water cycling issues.

The multi-stakeholder planning process
Various local and international research and development organisations concerned with urban food systems have convened a series of interlinked stakeholder meetings, in order to understand and improve Tamale’s food system and agree on producing a city agenda on urban agriculture. This multi-stakeholder dialogue process started in 2011, by RUAF and Tamale’s University for Development Studies (UDS) as partners under the Ghana Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) alliance. In 2013, UrbanFoodPlus, a research project on urban agriculture, in which UDS, RUAF and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) were also partners, became another umbrella under which these organisations and others, such as the Urban Agriculture Network, URBANET, could meet.

Accra versus Tamale
The stakeholder process was based on the Multi-stakeholder Policy formulation and Action Planning process (MPAP) designed by RUAF. RUAF and IWMI supported the development of a multi-stakeholder platform in Accra from 2005–2011, and a core working group: the Accra Working Group on Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture (AWGUPA), the adoption of a City Agenda, and support to farmers regarding business orientation in vegetable production as well as for safe use of waste water. In Accra, the project deliberately supported the involvement of key actors, later the AWGUPA, in a situation analysis (land use, farming systems, policies, stakeholders), which was discussed with wider platform actors and described in a policy narrative. In Tamale the analysis was mainly done by researchers. A lesson learned by RUAF teams working on similar processes in Accra, Freetown and Ibadan was that identifying an appropriate local leader for an MPAP process requires that instigators understand the local institutional setup. Authority for certain decisions rests with different bodies.
across locations, and gaining approval and legitimacy means engaging with different hierarchies in different cities. This observation is certainly relevant in Tamale, and is especially important in the contemporary context of local government empowerment in Ghana. In Accra, AWGUPA played a key role in facilitation. Such leadership is still missing in Tamale.

The issues in the City Agenda are quite similar, and the discussion is also comparable. In Accra, project activities were initially limited to a pilot project, but later included extensive farmer support (see above). In Tamale, larger-scale project activities took place under WASH and UrbanFood®. However, the involvement of multiple stakeholders, especially the policy makers and private sector, was limited in the discussion on urban and periurban agriculture (UPA). Active follow-up and facilitation is needed, including capacity building for the working group or core group, in leadership and project development.

Tamale

Key stakeholders in the MPAP included local NGOs; the two local government bodies that administer the metropolitan, Tamale Metropolitan Assembly and Sagnaragu District Assembly (the latter formed in 2012 as the city expanded); and other governmental institutions, such as the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, the Town and Country Planning Authority and the Ministry of Health (initially as independent government departments, later as part of the Tamale and Sagnaragu Assemblies). Participation is nested at different institutional and practical scales. At the end of 2015 the participants in Tamale agreed on a first Policy Narrative on UPA (Bellwood-Howard et al. 2015), and drafted a Strategic Agenda.

Participatory planning, however, is difficult to execute, especially when the impetus has come from external organisations and projects. When local institutions accept and commit to a City Strategic Agenda, they will be a step closer to owning the process, but there will still be a need for a coordinating body. The newly reinforced Tamale Metropolitan and Sagnaragu District Assemblies would seem to be appropriate lead institutions, yet they face accusations of inefficacy, particularly from the traditional authorities. Indeed, the contestations at the interface between the customary and legal land systems, the formal planning approach and informal realities, are the main points of contention structuring this particular discussion around spatial and infrastructural planning.

The stakeholder workshops showed that a major challenge in working towards participatory solutions is reconciling the interests of differentially powerful stakeholder groups at the institutional and local levels, even when an explicitly participatory process is used. This key element is of great relevance, and acknowledged to contemporary planning processes (also see the article above), but still often ignored. Within the current ongoing process of governmental decentralisation in Ghana, the actual enactment of participation should be carefully monitored, bearing in mind various actors’ power-laden interaction.

An important step is to explicitly recognise the role of informal activity in urban African food systems, rather than attempt to enforce formal approaches with limited resources (Watson and Agbola 2013). Considering the lip service paid to formalist solutions by actors such as chiefs and farmers, it could help to leave space (literally) for informal activities. This is the case at all nodes of the food web. Even if formal solutions such as official zoning of agricultural land have been suggested in a participatory environment, the observations above on participation demonstrate that this may be disingenuous. Thus, there is a rationale for thinking about how informality, such as opportunistic use of available irrigation sources or unofficial roadside vending, may be integrated.

The experiences of the Tamale stakeholder workshops consolidate those of the Accra MPAP, that funds should be earmarked for professional time dedicated to such a process. A helpful tool would therefore be a working group on these issues, comprising local action researchers and professional experts in traditional land ownership and geography, specific to the area.

After agreement on a City Strategic Agenda, it will now be important to obtain commitment to the participatory planning process. Planning at the scale of the administrative district and the traditional chieftaindom is critical. The discussions that took place during the Tamale multi-stakeholder forums confirmed that dialogue within a local, participatory version of the planning process reveals the diverse priorities of multiple stakeholders. These need to be considered if planning and implementation is to function in such a way that it meets the needs of the dwellers in a city-region. A multi-stakeholder dialogue, as mobilised by RUAF and partners in Tamale (similar to elsewhere in West Africa), should be owned by local stakeholders to facilitate such activity.

The full article will be published in the book presented on p10 in this magazine.

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References