

Urban agriculture: A solution to food insecurity

Amel Al-Ariqi

Published:28-12-2009



A fruit and vegetables shop in Sana'a. Many of the products he sells are grown abroad. The country imports as much as 75 per cent of its food requirements, and hence is vulnerable to shortages in world stocks. YT photo by Amira Al-Sharif

Yemen has suffered greatly during the world food crisis, since early 2008, which increased the number of people in poverty. About two million people are depending on the aids given by the World Food Program in Yemen. The country imports as much as 75 per cent of its food requirements, and hence is vulnerable to shortages in world stocks.

Yemen's poorest households may have no mechanism to cope with astronomical prices, warned international aids agencies in Yemen. The WFP says that higher prices have already forced six percent of the population of 20 millions according to 2004, below the poverty line. The rapid increase of population, high price of food, depletion of groundwater, and degradation of soil resources, and the unknown consequences of climate change, all contribute to aggravate the situation of food security in Yemen. **The concept of " Urban agriculture" emerges as a salutation for food security issue in developing countries, including Yemen.**

Urban agriculture can reduce poverty, improve nutrition in the capital city, said a report launched last week. The technique consists of growing plants and raising animals within and around cities.



The main source of irrigation is ground water (less than 55 per cent), which is used mainly for horticulture and qat production, while forage and grain production is rain-fed.
www.traveladventures.org

The report, which was conducted by a Yemeni agricultural team, under the supervision of the Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food security Foundation, said that urban agriculture has not just contributed to beautify the urban environment of the city, but it can reduce poverty, promote the food security, ease the demand for waste disposal (through composting) in Sana'a

According to the Central Establishment for Census, the percentage families who below the minimum poverty line in Sana'a are forming 11 percent of its three million inhabitants' population. Sana'a, which is situated on a plateau 2,200 meters above sea level, ranked fourth in the national survey of poverty in Yemen, after Taiz, Ibb, and Hudidah.

The team, which conducted the report, argued that the urban agriculture can be integrated into the urban economic and ecological system. Urban agriculture plays an important role in enhancing urban food security since the costs of supplying and distributing food to urban areas based on rural production and imports continue to increase, and does not satisfy the demand, especially of the poorer sectors of the population. Urban agriculture also contributes to local economic development, poverty alleviation and social inclusion of the urban poor and women in particular as they formed 27 per cent of urban agricultural permanent workers worker, adds green spaces in the city and facilitates the productive reuse of urban waste.

Why Sana'a?

The report mentioned that there are about 10,000 of Sana'a citizens still work on some 9,300 hectares of agricultural land in the city. The report, based on a census of 2007, said that on 7,700 hectares more than 37,500 tons of vegetables (leek, coriander, radish, onions and tomatoes), forage (alfalfa, maize, and barley), fruits (grapes, berries, nuts, peaches and apricots) qat and other seasonal grain crops were produced. Around 4,500 cows and 110,000 sheep and goat in addition to camels, donkeys, poultry and bees populate the city as well.

The older part of the historic city, which is now a UNESCO world heritage site, still contains 21 hectares of orchards and vegetable farms (like the Almaqashim or the mosque gardens) which supply the population with part of the local food needs. The size of land holdings range between 0.25 and 7 hectares; most of which are private properties (85%), the rest is public and Waqf (religious community) properties. The main source of irrigation is ground water (less than 55 per cent), which is used mainly for horticulture and qat production, while forage and grain production is rain-fed.

Another water source specific for Sana'a is water from the mosques or ablution water, which is used to irrigate the mosque gardens.

The report indicates that these agricultural activities constitute an essential part of urban livelihoods to supply food for consumption and income. The whole family is involved: women usually keep the animals and work in planting, harvesting and post-harvesting activities as well as marketing. This means that they directly sell their crops from the field or in nearby public markets.

Challenges should be overcome

Despite these encouraging initiatives, many obstacles remain. The lack of arable land, scarcity of water, periodic droughts, and difficult terrain hinders efforts to retain and harvest quality crops. Moreover, qat depletes scarce water resources and replaces essential food crops and agricultural exports, the report claims. However, even though it consumes scarce resources, the narcotic plant does provide employment for one in every seven working Yemeni.

The plant is ubiquitous: Some 72 percent of Yemeni males reported that they chew qat, compared to 33 percent of females. Because of its importance in Yemeni society, the poor willingly forego food in favor of buying qat. Commercial farming of fruits and vegetables provides a level of production to nearly satisfy domestic demand, noted the report.

However, the team is betting that such obstacles can be overmastered, and Sana'a won't be the only city where get benefits from the urban agriculture, as these concept can be replicated in many other cities in Yemen. Since 2008, there have been humble activities carried out by number of agriculture originations which declared a the Multi-Stakeholder Forum to promote Urban Agriculture in Sana'a. Urban farmers have been encouraged to organize themselves and share their thoughts and experiences, laws and regulations related to urban agriculture have been analyzed and suggestions for change have been made in coordination with the municipal and legislative institutions concerned. The main recommendation was the preservation of the remaining agriculture land and the need for spatial urban development towards the arid plateaus surrounding the city rather than on prime agricultural lands as it has been the case so far.

The Municipality of Sana'a has provided for a public space, which will be used as a demonstration plot for teachers and school children to learn how to implement small school gardens at their premises and encouraging their parents to grow crops at home. Moreover, the forum has prepared a Sana'a City Strategic Agenda on Urban Agriculture, which elaborated on issues as water availability and more efficient use of irrigation water; agriculture extension and development services; empowering women agriculture and different institutions; the reformulation of laws and regulations in order to preserve agricultural activities and enhance access to land and more specifically access to land for grazing.

The Forum contains representatives from nongovernmental organizations, research institutes, producer organizations and various municipal and ministerial departments including the departments of agriculture, public gardens and public works. The Sana'a Watershed Management Project, funded by the World Bank, the National Council for Urban Planning, individual urban farmers, the Association for the Conservation of Gardens in Old Sana'a, the Agricultural University of Sana'a and the Agriculture Cooperatives Union also contributed to the report's findings.