

The Political Economy Aspects of Land Use Planning for Urban Agriculture in Accra, Ghana

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As urban agriculture has gained greater legitimacy in various agencies and within more municipalities in the South, the question of land use planning for urban agriculture is receiving more serious attention. At the same time, the political economy aspects of urban agriculture remain poorly understood. Although questions of access to resources (land, water, credit) have figured into even the earliest discussions of urban agriculture, they too are only beginning to receive adequate attention from researchers, practitioners and decision-makers.

Land-use planning in the South is ultimately an issue of *struggle*. This includes struggle that is *material* e.g. livelihoods, food, income, water, land, labour, credit, commercial, residential and industrial development, and struggle that is *symbolic* e.g. identity, values, and meanings¹. Struggles over meaning for example, call into question how we understand cities, and what activities are legitimate in cities in the short and the long term. When political economy aspects of access to land at local levels intersect with policy and planning, the myriad of local struggles can then be seen in the context of the urban struggle over space.

Struggles over land for urban agriculture include both the daily negotiation amongst urban farmers over resource rights, as well as the negotiations and struggles between farmers and other urban land users (both authorized and unauthorized). Understanding that access to resources in urban agriculture is underwritten by struggles at multiple scales underscores the need to approach urban land planning as a site of struggle within urban spaces. Prior to creating a regulatory or planning system, planners and policy-makers must understand locally-specific social norms and systems at various locations where agriculture is practiced. As attempts to change rural tenure systems have shown, policies and regulations that are laid over top of pre-existing informal systems do not necessarily replace them. Land use planning for urban agriculture is not merely a technical or bureaucratic exercise; it is deeply cultural and social activity. This paper, which draws on ten months of field work focused on the access to land in intra-urban and peri-urban agriculture in and around Accra, Ghana, argues for closer attention to struggles over resources as a starting point for effective, equitable and sustainable land-use planning for urban agriculture.

The notion that rights in land are rights through people is a premise well-developed in the literature on rural land tenure in Africa.² The literature reveals that land rights are constituted through the everyday practices and negotiations over identity, labour, control of the harvest, crop selection, household obligations, money and food. Evidence from the range of city and regional studies on access to resources in urban areas suggests that struggles over land and space in urban areas also the manifestation of social and political relations. Literature reviewed for the Accra

¹ The notion that struggles over resources are simultaneously material and symbolic has been well-developed in the literature on political ecology. See for example contributions in Peet and Watts Eds. (1996) *Liberation Ecologies*

² See for example Berry (1989, 1993, 1997), Carney and Watts (1990), Haugerud (1989), Leach 1994, Mackenzie (1991, 1994, 1998), Moore (1993), Okoth-Ogendo (1989), Schroeder (1999).

fieldwork³ uncovered an array of formal and informal social and political relationships that mediated access and rights to land. These included government institutions and regulations, social institutions (e.g. marriage, kinship, customary authorities, ethnicity) and affiliations (both formal and informal) with churches, producer networks, friendships, cooperatives, informal land agents, private landowners, businesses, employers, neighbours etc.

In depth analysis of resource rights in different sites and property regimes in and outside of Accra reinforced the argument that rights in land are rights through people. There are diverse informal systems for allocating and governing rights to land that will need to be considered in any land use planning exercise. Land rights are part of social networks and relations that extend across farming sites, homes, communities and businesses. Tenure security is enhanced by norms and practices that reinforce existing relationships and rights. Within the complex social relations that mediate access to lands, socially differentiated land users derive various ‘bundles of rights’.⁴ In the peri-urban area of Accra, individuals and households negotiated sets of rights to land and relative security vis-à-vis other community members and interests by negotiating the social and political meanings of identity categories, particularly ethnicity, gender and age, within customary law. In four different property regimes within Accra (customary land, public open space, private open space and utility land⁵) relationships, whether cultivated through neighbours, fellow employees, kinship, marital status, ethnicity or nationality, were crucial for accessing and protecting specific rights to land for urban agriculture. Table 1 summarizes the tenure relationships uncovered in each site of the Accra study. Collectively and individually urban farmers developed tenure-building relationships and practices through story-telling and witnessing (i.e. discursive strategies), labour and seed exchange, tree planting and land borrowing. These practices reinforced their individual claims in contested urban and peri-urban spaces that were subject to authorized and unauthorized seizure and competing urban development activities.

A system of local governance exists at each site within which farmers exercise their rights to land. Depending on the relative security of the farmers in relation to formal rights (i.e. recognition by the state in the case of customary law, and the land holders in the case of the private open space and utility land) a mixture of formal and informal social and political structures governed the use of land. Each site enforced gatekeeping practices, jointly protecting the claims of farmers at the site against encroachment by incoming farmers and other land users. For urban agriculture and most other commercial and non-commercial informal land uses in Accra, good relationships rather than documentation is key to tenure security. Trust is an important factor in the procurement and exchange of urban farming land. Therefore, a sustainable and equitable land use policy must build from pre-existing social exchange systems rather than attempt to replace them with a bureaucratic and technical solution.

³ See Flynn-Dapaah (2001) *Land Negotiations and Tenure Relationships: Accessing Land for Urban and Peri-Urban Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa* Cities Feeding People Report Series, no. 35, Ottawa: IDRC.

⁴ Kasanga et al. (1996) show for communities in the peri-urban area of Accra that ethnicity (an identity category that distinguishes ‘insiders’ from ‘outsiders’) is a key axis of social differentiation which bundles rights to land under a specific set of rules.

⁵ The land under the high power voltage lines owned by the Volta River Authority was characterized as utility land

Table 1: Key relationships /social relations mediating access to land and resource relations in Accra

	Key relationships /social relations mediating access to land and resource relations
Customary Lands: La Stool Lands	Social Institutions: kinship, ethnicity, marriage Government: agricultural extension officer, MP Formal Relationship: La Farmers' Association Informal Relationship: Borrower-Caretaker
Private Property: School of Hygiene	Formal Relationships: Employer-Employee Informal Relationships: Tenants in Residences
Public Open Space: Abossey Okai	Social Institutions: kinship Informal Relationship: friendship, countrymen
Utility Land: Dworwulu	Social Institutions: ethnicity Government: Ministry of Agriculture Formal Relationships: employer, Association Informal Relationships: residential neighbours, friendship
Customary Land: Afuaman (Peri- Urban Area)	Social Institutions: kinship, ethnicity, class, marriage, age Formal Relationships: Community-Based Organizations, development projects

In the context of increased food insecurity, urban expansion, and modernization, urban and peri-urban agriculture is the site of daily struggles over space and meaning. Urban agriculture raises many spatial questions, principal among them, how do we see urban spaces? Several studies seeking to explore land use planning for urban agriculture in African cities have struggled with this question⁶. This question of defining urban spaces often leaves urban agriculture in an awkward position in terms of official policies, programs and practices. This results in inconsistent enforcement of existing policies and regulations, vague statements regarding official attitudes, inter-departmental contradictions in policy, a cumbersome process for formally acquiring land, and a lack of coherency or cross-sectoral policies and legislation. At their core, the challenges faced by urban authorities are reflections over values and meanings of development in urban spaces.

What emerges from various studies is the need to create flexible systems rather than blueprints. Land use planners must not ignore the daily struggles and negotiations; rather they should study and integrate them. When farmers at the four sites in Accra were asked to discuss the various options for land-use planning being proposed in the literature (e.g. green belts, land banks, licensing, cooperatives, fixed-term agreements, land rents and temporary rights to idle lands) it was evident that different farmers working under specific property rights regimes or farming for

⁶ See Mbiba 2001, Potts, 1989 and Jarlov 2001.

specific purposes (i.e. commercial rather than subsistence) favoured different mechanisms and programs to ensure their tenure security. Although tenure security results from social relations, farmers opposed enforced communal relations for urban cultivation such as cooperatives. Farmers at all sites strongly emphasized the need for a coherent policy and extensive public education to see urban agriculture recognized as a legitimate activity within the urban landscape and a good use of urban land and water resources.

The study also revealed the relative comfort farmers have with the notion of bundles of rights. With the exception of the Ga farmers who have rights to customary lands, farmers in Accra were demanding specific sets of rights (e.g. rights to cultivate annual and perennial crops, rights to fair notice of land developments, rights to water etc.) rather than ownership rights which would include the right to sell, lease or lend land to a third party. The Land Title Registration Law (PNDCL 152) in Ghana already accommodates the notion of multiple rights and interests on a single plot. Only one allodial title can be registered within the boundaries of a single plot, however, other rights and interests including sharecropping, land use rights, leasing agreements and customary titles can also be registered. The legislation is not without problems, including limited enactment since 1986. However, it provides a legal framework for developing a land use policy that includes urban agriculture in that it legitimizes multiple rights to a single plot of land.

In Accra urban agriculture is a legal activity. However support for urban agriculture (and to urban farmers) is partial and inconsistent. Although there is a focal point for urban agriculture within the Accra Metropolitan Assembly and the will to formulate a comprehensive urban agriculture policy, progress is slow. According to an informant in the Lands Commission it is time to recognize the contribution of UA to the economy and to seriously consider UA in urban planning. The Metropolitan Directorate for the Ministry of Agriculture, Accra Metropolitan Assembly has committed to address UA policy over a period of three years.

A policy that draws first from the daily negotiations and practices of urban agriculture and that recognizes that land use planning for urban agriculture is a part of complex material and symbolic struggles, will see more acceptance and success than one based solely on quantitative farmer surveys and geographic information systems to classify vacant lands. These tools will prove useful, but should be part of a process that builds on in-depth studies of the diverse social norms and practices in the city. Studying the current systems will point researchers and policy-makers to people who fall between the gaps of the current social networks, be they women, youth, or migrants from rural parts of Ghana and neighbouring countries. Planners also need to balance the cultivators' desire to maintain relative autonomy (and therefore individual bargaining power and control) with the needs of various municipal and national departments / agencies to see people organized for land delivery, communication, service provision and enforcement of health and environmental regulations. In Accra, where urban agriculture is legal and generally accepted, the challenge is to develop a cross-sectoral policy and means of coordinating urban agriculture with communication channels that reach all interested parties. This requires more attention to uncovering locally-specific needs, rules and capacities to participate in a formal UA program that allows for experimentation, effective monitoring, and the flexibility to revise and engage multiple solutions and interventions within the same city.

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