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Optimising agricultural land use in the city area

Access to land and water, adequate norms and regulations, integration in land use planning

EXPERIENCES IN MADHYAPUR THIMI MUNICIPALITY, NEPAL

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An article on PAHAR's experiences with urban agriculture in Madhyapur Thimi Municipality was published in the Urban Agriculture Magazine, Number 4, July 2001.

PAHAR was involved in the overall planning of Madhyapur Thimi Municipality. With the guidance of Prof. Alexander Henz (Federal Institute of Technology Zurich), a planning approach was developed, based on „Sustainability“ (interpreted from the definition by the "World Commission on Environment and Development", the so called Brundtland Commission in 1987); the present day needs will be pursued in a manner that ensures future generations the possibility to meet their needs. It was through the theoretical exercise of analysing the municipality based on sustainability, that the importance of urban agriculture as an integral part of urban development became apparent.

The strategies that can be used to enhance access to land for the urban poor to practice food production

1. Land presently being used for agriculture

The first step in municipal planning for urban agriculture is to identify all land that is presently being used for agriculture and to distinguish who is working the land (the owner, tillers, cooperatives, companies, etc.). The task of the municipality would be to secure as much of this land for agricultural purposes as possible. There are two main factors that need to be considered, the legal rights of the landowners and the economic implications of agriculture vs. other usage.

In Madhyapur Thimi Municipality, over 50% of the land is still being used for agriculture; though urban sprawl is spreading rapidly. The immediate task of the municipality was to secure as much of this land as possible and develop a mechanism to selectively release areas for development in the future. Out of the 11.47 square km municipal area, just about half was set-aside as "Reserve Zone". The possibility for non-agricultural development to take place is kept to a minimum by the municipality not providing any infrastructure or services in this zone. It was necessary to make provisions to release protected land for urban development in respond to political and economic pressures, however only upon a genuine, documented need and subject to extensive community discussions.

2. Potential land for agricultural use

In municipalities where little or no agricultural activities are taking place, potential agricultural land needs to be earmarked. Since this did not apply for Madhyapur Thimi Municipality, detailed investigations for such cases were not carried out.

However, it is necessary to prepare a set of parameters and guidelines for identification of potential agriculture land in municipalities. It would then be the task of the municipality to develop the legal framework to obligate agriculture activities on these plots.

The development of adequate local bylaws, norms and regulations regarding urban agriculture

Land ownership and land ownership rights play a major role in developing strategies to enhance urban agriculture. In Madhyapur Thimi, most of the land is privately owned, and is therefore subjected to land ownership rights. Land ownership in Nepal has more than just functional or economic value. Only Nepalese can own land and therefore the land ownership papers are seen to be even more important than citizenship papers. This phenomenon has deep rooted implications on the rights of the individual landowners, allowing them complete authority over their plot of land. It is therefore only possible to regulate development through indirect means such as using incentives and deterrents.

In the case of Madhyapur Thimi, local bylaws, norms and regulations regarding urban agriculture can only function as guidelines for the implementation of municipal planning. It is therefore vital to integrate urban agriculture into the overall system of urban development. PAHAR developed the “Urban Agriculture Support Program” to support the zoning bylaws.

1. Political System

There has to be a political lobby for the farmers and those involved in part-time farming. Even though in Madhyapur Thimi people involved in the agriculture sector comprise of over 70% of the population, they have little influence on politics.

2. Social System

The younger generation is slowly moving away from agricultural activities in search of jobs paying salaries. This trend is greatly enhanced by the low image given to farmers. The social status of farmers needs to be improved by introducing more modern farming methods and management.

3. Economic System

Agriculture in urban areas has to compete with more lucrative activities. Without improved production, management and marketing systems, it is not possible for agriculture to sustain in urban areas.

4. Environmental System

There are areas where agriculture has a good chance of competing against other forms of development. In flood plains of rivers, construction costs are high and there is danger of flooding. In such areas, the chances of success when using incentives and deterrents is much greater. The integration of waste and sewage disposal with composting and manure production can make urban agriculture a sustainable part of urban development.

The program was developed based on 5 years of planning experience in Madhyapur Thimi. Certain parts of the program were being introduced, however due to the growing political instability in the country since June 2001 and the local government being dissolved in October 2002, very little progress has been made in carrying out the proposed „Urban Agriculture Support Program“. International organizations that were initially interested in supporting the program through technical expertise and initial funding are hesitating to participate. However, the importance of urban agriculture is growing as political disturbances in rural areas persist.