Promoting Urban Agriculture in Post-conflict Greater Freetown Area, Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone experienced a civil conflict between 1991 and 2002 as a result of which many people fled to the Greater Freetown Area (GFA). During and after this unfortunate period, urban agriculture became an important livelihood strategy. It is increasingly being recognised as a reliable coping mechanism for redressing food shortages and gaining employment.

The small West African state of Sierra Leone is currently regarded as the poorest country in the world (UNDP, 2007). Despite abundant natural resources and the favourable agricultural climate, the country’s economy has been in steady decline since the early 1980s. This can be attributed to a variety of contributing factors, foremost of which is the recently concluded decade-long civil war (1991-2002).

The Greater Freetown Area now covers about 8,100 hectares, and it is estimated that up to one quarter of the country’s population: around 1 million people, reside in Freetown (2004 census). Before this time, rural to urban migration was already high, the population, for instance, nearly quadrupled between 1963 and 1985. But in the nineties economic life and food security deteriorated rapidly, and during civic strife, agriculture resurfaced in the city. Rural families were destabilised and traumatised by rebel insurgents, causing a spontaneous mass-migration of people. More than 2 million people were displaced, and major economic activities, such as farming, mining, and forestry, were disrupted. People flooded into Freetown, increasing the demand for food.

After the war, a significant number of ruraly displaced persons preferred to permanently stay in the city in search of jobs and improved living conditions. This increased population created high pressures on food supplies and urban facilities and services. A majority of these urban dwellers are rural migrants, with a strong agricultural background. Many public sector workers became unemployed, and some of their spouses entered the informal sector, cultivating leafy vegetables and marketing fruits and vegetables within and near the Freetown municipal boundary. Young displaced people and women joined the urban agriculture marketing chain by preparing fast food for the growing numbers of unemployed, or divorced family members. These factors contributed to a significant expansion of urban and periurban agriculture as an essential coping strategy for providing the vital augmentation of food stocks.

**Attention to Urban Agriculture**

In 2002 a national Food Security Programme named “Operation Feed the Nation” was launched. The main thrust of this programme was to significantly augment domestic food production through increased food production in all agricultural production systems. It includes reference to urban and periurban agriculture. The belief that agricultural development is a critical element in economic development and poverty alleviation now pervades all of the government’s actions, as is reflected in the Agricultural Sector Review (MAFFS, 2004) and the country’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (Govt. of Sierra Leone, 2005). Urban farming has become one of the survival strategies adopted by the urban population of Freetown, and significantly contributes to the food supply in the city. The agricultural sector review of Sierra Leone sponsored by the government of Sierra Leone, FAO and
the World Bank recognised the importance of urban and periurban agriculture in poverty alleviation and ensuring food security. Consequently local and international non-govern mental organisations initiated urban and periurban agriculture programmes in Freetown.

Higher educational institutions played an important role in raising awareness about the importance of urban agriculture in post-conflict GFA among the major stakeholders, who since 2005 have been regularly meeting under the Freetown Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture Programme (FUPAP) and have developed a City Strategic Action plan.

By the official end of the war in 2002, the national higher educational Institutions (i.e. Njala University College and Fourah Bay College, both at that time part of the University of Sierra Leone), in collaboration with their international counterparts and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) started promoting urban agriculture in Freetown. To help feed the burgeoning city, since 2003 the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) has promoted urban farming associations and training under the UN Food and Agriculture Organization Special Project for Food Security’s Farmers Field School.

Within the framework of the Cities Farming for the Future (CFF) programme of the International Network of Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security (RUAF), the FUPAP Initiative was launched in Freetown in 2006. RUAF-CFF facilitates participatory and multi-stakeholder policy formulation and action planning (MPAP) on urban agriculture in Accra, as such supporting city authorities in recognizing the benefits of urban agriculture and addressing urban poverty, food security and improved urban environmental management. With the re-establishment of the Freetown City Council, the newly constituted multi-stakeholder city team under FUPAP is working toward the full integration of agriculture into city development plans. Starting in 2009, RUAF will focus its activities in Freetown to supporting market chain development and farmer organisation under the From Seed to Table programme. Urban agriculture will be further supported under two programmes funded by the European Union programme on Food Security that will also start in 2009.

A three-year DelPHE-funded collaborative partnership, involving institutions from Sierra Leone, the UK and New Zealand, was launched in January 2008 at a crucial point in the country’s post-conflict reconstruction phase, with the aim of contributing to a greater understanding of the incidence, dynamics and importance of UPA among households in Freetown.

**Urban Agriculture**

Urban and periurban agriculture has always been practiced in Freetown as a source of food, income and employment, but only in the past six years has its importance grown. It contributes substantially to the local economic development of Freetown and the country as a whole.

The majority of the rural migrants and internally displaced persons who fled their homes during the war are skillful farmers, and developed a keen interest in urban agriculture as the best option for ensuring food supply, survival and for achieving sustainable livelihoods. Urban agriculture currently provides full-time or part-time employment to over 1400 people, consisting of 1105 females and 285 males, and including both farmers and middlemen. Women are traditional gardeners and normally tend the crops. Men provide capital investment assistance and physical preparation of land such as initial land clearing, making the beds for planting, and building the irrigation channels in the swampy areas and the appropriate drainage structure. They also harvest and market the crops. A significant proportion of male urban farmers are also engaged in other activities, such as the civil service or the artisan sector. Reports suggest that a portion of the income generated from these other livelihood activities is often re-invested in farms and food production. Almost all urban farmers belong to a farmers’ association or a community-based organization, except those individuals who farm the back plots of their homes.

Through the exploratory study undertaken by FUPAP in 2007, urban agriculture was characterised and several problems constraining its development were identified. The study showed, among others, that urban agriculture is widespread in Freetown. The Freetown urban and periurban areas are divided into 8 local administrative zones and agricultural activities were identified in all zones, although most activities were observed in the Western Area of the city (West I, II, and III), and the Eastern Area (East I, II, and III). The hillsides, slopes and valleys of the hilly terrain that forms the landmass on which the city is built, offers an ideal location for this type of agricultural practice.

Over 30 crops have been encountered in Freetown and 10 species of animals in domestication and husbandry activities. The most commonly cultivated crops are exotic vegetables (cabbage, lettuce, carrots, spring onions, tomatoes, beans, etc.) and locally consumed vegetable crops (potato leaves, spinach, cassava leaves, etc.). These are perishables which are consumed on a daily basis and cannot withstand long-haul transportation. They are usually harvested and sold at the market on the same day. Mostly free ranged local poultry and piggery are the main animals raised. Among the constraints identified in the study, access to land and security on tenure, access to clean water for irrigation.
inaugurate and untimely supply of farm inputs, and limited agricultural extension services are the most important. Urban farmers face with fierce competition in Freetown for the sale of their products from similar imported vegetables and animal products (Cornell University and NUC, 2006; Winnebah, 2007) and require capacity strengthening in critical aspects of urban agricultural production and marketing of their products.

In addition, FUPAP identified a need for public awareness of the strategic importance of urban agriculture among the main city stakeholders, and formulation or revision of acts and by-laws. This process has started in the past two years and will continue supported by the different programmes mentioned above. Most of these activities have been agreed under the Freetown City Strategic Agenda.

City Strategic Agenda
One of the principal outputs of FUPAP (2008) was the agreed Five Year (2009-2013) Rolling Freetown City Strategic Agenda. Under an agreed vision: to promote the development of urban and peri-urban agriculture that significantly contributes to urban poverty reduction, food security and improved urban environmental management, a number of activities have been prioritised.

1. Regular meetings of the Multi-stakeholder Forum, in which the major stakeholders on urban agriculture participate, and which is responsible for the promotion and development of urban agriculture in Freetown.
2. A number of additional funds have been successfully accessed. The European Union will support urban agricultural activities in Freetown with two international Non-governmental Organisations, COOPI and Concern Worldwide (with RUAF), who have agreed to coordinate and share lessons under FUPAP.
3. Njala University, a major agricultural training institution, has incorporated urban and periurban agriculture into its agriculture curriculum.
4. The Freetown City Council, responsible for the administration of Freetown Municipality, has put modalities in place for the full integration of urban and periurban agriculture in its city planning agenda.
5. MAFFS has developed enabling policies for food security involving the commercialization of agricultural enterprises, encouraging people to invest in agriculture, and committing more land and resources to agriculture production purposes. Incorporating urban agriculture into its Food Security Programme further allows it to benefit from funds allocated by the Central Government.
6. At Fourah Bay College, extensive research is on-going, and the researchers have agreed to collaborate with other scientists at Njala University and the relevant line ministries to promote the development of urban agriculture in Freetown.

Lessons learned
Urban agriculture is recognised as an appropriate strategy in augmenting food production during crisis periods. It has played an important role in the survival of many displaced people at the peak of the war and is still a survival strategy for many. It significantly contributes to food security and creates employment particularly for youths.

Nearly 80 percent of wastes generated in Freetown are degradable organic materials, which can be used as organic manure and compost for the production of vegetables. Acquisition of land for urban farming is still very challenging. Although, according to government policy, all wetlands that belong to government can be used for agricultural activities, such use is threatened by rapid estate development.

The multi-stakeholder process for action planning and policy development for urban agriculture included the major stakeholders in dialogue and joint decision-making. The challenge is to maintain this process. Urban agriculture in Greater Freetown has been recognised as a main source of livelihood for disadvantaged communities. The development of urban agriculture is now high on the political agenda and is seen as pivotal in the achievement of food security in Sierra Leone, while also improving the environment in Freetown.

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