

The Impact of the Economic Meltdown on Urban Agriculture in Harare

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Harare is the capital city of Zimbabwe. With approximately 2.5 million inhabitants (1.8 million as of the 2002 census), here almost 50 percent of Zimbabwe's urban population lives. Recent economic difficulties have led to a phenomenal growth in urban agriculture in Harare as well as in other cities in Zimbabwe.

The spatial growth of the city of Harare has been largely lateral, consisting of a large uptake of surrounding agricultural land for urban development (Toriro, 2007). The economy of Harare as with the rest of Zimbabwe is agro-based. Agriculture drives the economy by providing the inputs that are processed in industries. Many of the manufacturing industries produce machinery that supports agriculture. Over the past decade, the economy of the country has been in a downward slide. This has been attributed to a number of factors that include poor economic management by the government, disruption of commercial farming resulting from the fast-track land reform programme, successive droughts and economic sanctions imposed on the country's rulers by traditional international financiers.

Urban agriculture as a response to economic crisis

Although it has become more visible in the last fifteen years (Toriro, 2005), urban agriculture has always been present in Harare. The recent increase began in the 1990s when the government's economic structural adjustment programme (ESAP) opened the economy to global competition, leading to a massive closure of industries. Many factory and other workers were retrenched and adopted urban agriculture as a means to provide food for their families. A few people with access to larger and secure land even used urban agriculture as a form of new employment for themselves and one or two others. Several studies (e.g. Chaipa, 2001) indicated that the total land under cultivation in Harare increased by over 90 percent in the early nineties.

The growth became phenomenal after the economic downturn following the 2000 general elections and the 2002 presidential elections. Many countries in the west refused to accept the results of the elections, which many believed had not been free and fair. Sanctions were imposed on the country leading to the dwindling of direct foreign investment.



More extension officers are being appointed in the city
Photo: Percy Toriro

Foreign currency became scarce, leading to the country's failure to import spare parts for industries and other basic needs. Many more industries downsized or closed down. Thousands more workers were rendered unemployed or under-employed. Many of these people turned to agriculture so that they could grow their own food to feed their families. Harare now covers approximately 1000 square kilometres. It is estimated that almost 50 percent of this area, which was previously open space, undeveloped land, or reserved for other uses, is currently being used for agriculture. During the summer (the rain season), the main crops grown on the open spaces are staple food crops (predominantly maize and beans). Less than 20 percent of this land is used throughout the year due to lack of access to water. As many as 40 percent of the farmers produce enough cereals to cover half a year's consumption. Few farmers (less than 10 percent) sell the staple maize to the market.

Profile of cultivators

The profile of urban cultivators has changed over time as a result of the economic downturn. In the past, it was mainly the poorer citizens who used open spaces (off-plot) for crop production. But now there is competition amongst people of all income brackets. People with higher incomes, who could afford to buy their own food, say five years ago, now have found their incomes so eroded by inflation that they cannot afford to buy all food provisions. They have to resort to urban agriculture to supplement their diets and their incomes. It is

now common to see families from high-income residential areas cultivating open space areas that used to be cultivated by their employees and residents from lower-income areas.

Pressure on land

There has been extreme pressure on the land in the past few years. This has been aggravated by the fact that there is limited planning of what land may be used for agriculture in Harare. Most farmers who cultivate on the open spaces in the city have acquired the land by “first claim”; i.e. the first to find vacant land and start using it becomes the de facto “owner” of the piece of land. However, these farmers have limited security of tenure. The actual owners of the land (private or public institutions) can decide to use it at any time. In addition, other farmers aware of this informal arrangement can take a chance and cultivate it earlier in the season than the current occupier. Such conflicts are now common because of the huge demand for land.

Recognition and support

On the positive side, the government increasingly recognises and supports the growing participation in urban agriculture. The Governor of the Harare Metropolitan Province (a largely urban province covering Greater Harare and the satellite towns of Ruwa and Chitungwiza), Mr. David Karimanzira, has been actively supporting urban agriculture (since he was appointed to the position three years ago) and encouraging the allocation of allotments for agriculture. He has spearheaded the demarcation and allocation of one-hectare plots to urban farmers in the largely urban province. He also facilitated government inputs support to farmers in these cities, and supported initiatives like farmer field schools, and show days where farmers exhibit their produce and exchange information. The Governor has been in the news regularly speaking about urban agriculture (The Herald, 2008).

Growth became phenomenal after the economic downturn starting in 2000

Photo: Percy Toriro



The economic downturn coupled with the acceptance of agriculture as an alternative livelihood strategy has also encouraged local authorities to be more sympathetic to agriculture. Prior to the year 2000, there were reports of local authorities destroying “illegally cultivated crops”. This mainly referred to crops grown in areas where the farmers had not been formally allocated plots by the local authorities. There is no single report of crops being destroyed by authorities since the turn of the millennium. This has been a significant development for councils that used to use destruction of crops as a deterrent to other would-be cultivators in “illegal” areas.

Many other organisations have started to recognise agriculture as a viable survival and economic activity in urban areas. In Harare alone, the work of RUAF through the Municipal Development Partnership (MDP) is now complemented by organisations such as SNV, World Vision, Practical Action, Mercy Corps, and Environment Africa. All these organisations are also collaborating with each other in city multi-stakeholder platforms. MDP has also been asked by NGOs and local authorities for ideas on how to run viable urban agriculture programmes.

Five years ago there were only two extension officers in the city, who were not even sure of their duties with respect to urban agriculture. As a result of the huge number of urban farmers in Harare (now estimated at over 500 000) and the lobbying by stakeholders through the Harare Urban Agriculture Stakeholders Forum, the city now has six extension officers. It is expected that more officers will be appointed in Harare and the satellite towns as well as in other cities in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The economic downturn in Harare has led to the prospering of urban agriculture. There is cooperation and collaboration amongst both governmental and non-governmental organisations. The next challenge is for Harare planners to properly plan for agriculture. The successful Bulawayo programme on urban agriculture (facilitated by RUAF’s Cities Farming for the Future) has become the local centre of excellence for planning and management of urban agriculture, and it could help sustain the growth that has been experienced in the sector.

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