

Urban Agriculture in Kenya – Experience and Challenges

by Dr. W.H.A. Olima

**Department of Land Development,
University of Nairobi, Kenya.**

Abstract

This discussion paper examines the presence and character of urban agriculture in the city of Nairobi. It is mean present experiences on optimizing agricultural land use in the city area. From the onset, it has to be noted that there is widespread urban agricultural practices in Nairobi which need official recognition, support and encouragement. It is being practiced in Nairobi where it is playing an important role in the food security to a substantial number of households as it provides a food safety net for the households during the period of massive unemployment in the formal sector.

Introduction

There is general recognition of the importance of urban and peri-urban agriculture in most countries in Eastern and Southern African region. Many low income households as well as higher income households are constantly turning to urban and peri-urban agriculture for the production of food for own consumption and income generation. It is argued that the principal reason why people are engaging in urban and peri-urban agriculture is in response to inadequate, unreliable and irregular access to food supplies. Available literature shows that over the past ten(10) years, there has been rapid growth in interest and activity in peri-urban agriculture (Mbiba, 1998, 1999; Lee-Smith, 1998). Recent studies have revealed that 64 percent of urban households in Kenya practice some form of urban agriculture (Diana Lee-Smith, 1987:85).

Urban agriculture is thus an instrument geared towards tackling household food insecurity, increasing urban employment, and encouraging productive participation in local and urban development.

Status of Urban Agriculture in Kenya

Most of the major urban centers are characterized by some form of farming activities not only in their outskirts but also in the inner built-up areas. These farming activities include the cultivation of food and cash crops, animal husbandry, forestry, horticulture including the production of flowers and garden plants.

These farming activities usually take place:

- Along roadsides
- In the middle of roundabouts
- Between railway lines
- In open spaces and parks
- Along rivers and river valleys
- Under power lines
- Within backyards of residential plots.

This brings into focus the problem of access to land for urban agriculture in Kenya's urban area. However, people of all socio-economic classes usually grow food whenever and wherever possible. The significance of urban agriculture as an important and growing sector of the urban space economy can be appreciated at individual household, community, and national levels with its widespread practice intensifying in Kenya only in the late 1980s and during the 1990s due to rising food prices and rising unemployment..

Constraints to the development of urban agriculture

Several factors have been identified as constraints. Some are imposed by the government, the market, and support agencies. The constraints include:

- Inadequate institutional/legal frameworks
- Limited access to agricultural inputs and post production services
- Inadequate technical knowledge of urban agricultural practices
- Organizational constraints
- Political and socio-cultural biases
- Lack of physical security
- Poor rating of urban agriculture as an authentic urban land use
- Lack of access to land

What has been the urban policy responses to urban agriculture in Kenya

Currently there are no urban planning policies that specifically address the issue of urban agriculture as means for food security, with western concepts continuing to dominate the field of urban planning. The planning approach has led to dense residential areas with little space left over for other food production activities i.e. urban agriculture. The regulations regarding crop cultivation, however, are still forbidding save for agricultural land that came to be located within the recently urban boundaries after their expansions.

In short, urban planners have continued to exhibit low levels of involvement in food systems such as urban agriculture. Some of the reasons have been rather interesting and include:

- (i) It is not our core business:
 - Food systems such as urban agriculture are indirectly linked to built environment

- Urban agriculture and food security issues affect planning only as land use, zoning and location decisions
 - Provision of spatial framework to harmonize the environmental and socioeconomic development activities.
 - Production and distribution of accurate geographical data
 - Transformation of land tenure system through ascertainment of rights and interests.
 - Maintenance of land records for safe custody of land resource.
- (ii) Agriculture is a rural issue
- Food farming issues should be handled by rural development policies
 - Agriculture in urban areas interferes with more productive use or rent of land by other economic activities
- (iii) Public health concerns – urban agriculture may lead to contamination risks of producers, handles and consumers.
- (iv) Environmental issues – Visual untidiness, soil erosion, destruction of vegetation, pollution of resources, and depletion of water bodies.

It is recommend that urban agriculture ought to be improved and integrated into formal city planning. This can be done at individual level, city level and at the level of central government with the Nairobi City Council drawing up an urban food policy for Nairobi and updating its physical development plan. There is need to amend the city council b-laws, enabling legislation as well as various Acts of Parliament such as Local Government Act (Cap 265) and Public Health Act (Cap 242) to facilitate and enhance urban agriculture to the benefit of the urban-resource poverty.