

A geographic glimpse over Urban Agriculture

DOURADO, Ana Clara^{1, a}, SALES, Marli^{2, b}

¹University of Brasilia – Distrito Federal, Brasil

²University of Brasilia – Distrito Federal, Brasil

^aanaclara_anita@hotmail.com, ^bmarlisales@unb.br

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand in which space agriculture can spread itself, based on a geographic glimpse, focusing on the potentiation of urban agriculture through the instruments of public policy that can stimulate and promote that practice by urban population. Thus, it is proposed to develop a bibliographic reference discussion that is related to the theme of this work, showing some theoretical points of view, as well as some practices of urban agriculture in several territories.

Introduction

There are records of Urban Agriculture (UA) around the world and in Brazil that describe it as way of linking individuals to spaces, showing how dynamic theses spaces are, whether they are urban or rural. Besides, they keep changing and readapting the new relationships that may arise. Also, urban agriculture composes spaces that are being misused, underutilized or “empty” spaces, through the production of food and medicinal herbs; raising small animals can promote both the interaction among people in public, collective or private environments simply by exchanging and donating seeds, and the straight commerce among producers and consumers.

The geography of urban agriculture

In geographic science some theoretical bases bring the discussion about dichotomies or continuities in geographic space, focusing on the relation between urban and rural. Some authors, as presented by Moreira [1] see the rural space as the opposite of the urban, while other authors, like Lefebvre (1970) [2] perceive this relation as dynamic continuities. The flows that are realized in theses spaces show that there are intense relations between the rural space and the city, Moreira reminds us that for a long time:

The rural was identified with the traditional, the wild, the primitive, the uncivilized, the conservative and the authoritarian. Resistant to changes, the local, the rural, the field and the territory were associated to stable and homogeneous cultures, averse to changes and the experience of what is new (...) While the urban territory was symbolically linked to the continuous time, to the mechanism of the clock and to the geometric horizontal-vertical space of streets and buildings, the rural territory was associated to seasonal time and the nature ecosystem space. (MOREIRA, 2007, 76). (translated)

According to Roca [3] the cities' economic and demographic growth led to the reconfiguration of urban spaces through land use, population structures and social practices, and this idea is

corroborated with Santos [4] since new functions replace the old ones every day, and these new functions impose themselves, besides being practiced in the space.

Agreeing with Milton Santos [5] the space is not only product, means and condition of social life but it also reflects the evolution of the capitalist system and, in this context, the usage related to urbanization (which is one of the mechanisms of the accumulation system, in which activities of rural profile can be developed, such as agriculture) are always rising. According as this activity organizes itself along the urbanization system, it sets up as urban agriculture.

Urban agriculture can contribute for the production in urban space, reframing areas within this complex space and bringing as consequences a set of social, economic, cultural and environmental factors that are relevant issues for agriculture.

The theoretical foundation in the debate about urban agriculture has its main basis on Agronomy and Economy, subjects that focus on food and nutrition safety of vulnerable population, probably because their main features are also related to food supply of population. However, Monteiro [6] reminds us the fact that UA is a human activity, and it also holds environmental, economic and social aspects that play important role in both human and political development. Because of this plurality of aspects to be considered, Geography is present to perform a related analysis, where the plurality of aspects interact.

The difference from agriculture to urban agriculture is not only related to the localization – urban spaces, but mainly because it happens linked to both economic and ecological urban systems [7], what refers to the complexity of the urban space and the diversity of individuals and interests that it holds.

According to Moujeot (2000) [8]

UA is growing out of its ability to assist with, resolving or coping with diverse development challenges. It is spurred by a complex web of factors still little understood, not the least of which are urban poverty and food insecurity

It is important to understand UA as a social activity of cultivation, production and processing of food or non-food items, which is practiced in urban spaces, where it is aimed to locally use the human resources and materials of the urban space. Thus, the UA that exists in each space is peculiar to it, since it is intrinsically related and it is developing from it.

Monteiro [7], states that social issues (access to food and health system), economic issues (unemployment, generation and maintaining employments) and environmental issues (pollution of water, air and land) cannot be neglected. Actually, they can impact positively when UA adjusts to the local reality, along with the set of its functionalities in the process of production of spaces. The functions of UA are mainly based on food safety, well-being (environment, health, etc.), identity and ties of sociability, reinforcing the complexity of the subject, as we stand for it in this paper.

The demographic formation of cities is a complex historic process that, shortly, comes from industrial revolution and capital accumulation, where many people “lost” their lands or went through environmental, economic and social problems, besides participating from the rural exodus. Thereby, many people that live in the city today, who came from the rural area, have a culture, combine knowledge and habits that are ignored in the urban scenario, besides living with urban problems such as: unemployment, violence, decrease of social intimacy. These individuals are the main audience of urban agriculture, but not in an exclusive way. Anyone who shows interest and

the will of realizing UA is welcome, whether they are children, elderly, men or women. There are no restrictions. So, the producers can be truly heterogeneous.

Urban agriculture is an activity that, if applied, can participate in the process of production of the urban space, creating several territories in the city. Abramovay [7] brings the territorial dimension linked to development:

“The territorial dimension of development has been arising the interest of social scientists[...]. The main idea is that the territory, more than a simple physical base for the relationships among individuals and companies, has a social tissue, a complex organization composed by ties that go beyond its natural character and the costs with transportation and communication. A territory represents chained relationships with historical roots, political configurations and identities that play a little known role in the economic development” ABRAMOVAY, 1998, 6/7. (translated)

Development is a common goal, but this concept can be conceived in diverse ways, according to interests and intencionalities, being possible several interpretations coming to be a controversial subject. Therefore, it is desirable that the development promoted by UA be socially fair, economically viable, ecologically and environmentally balanced, culturally adapted and respected and, also, that it promotes to producers and consumers fair relation, in which the production process is enhanced.

The UA uses the geographic space, and it is also a way of producing it, so it must be considered by the management and planning staff of cities, as well as by scholars in spatial dynamics.

The urban planning must be done in the territory by the people who use it, in a way that these individuals can identify the potentialities of the referred territory. However, so that population be a transforming agent it is necessary that they appropriate the territories in which they are interested. As a consequence, the empowerment of the population occurs.

The empowerment of population consolidates a real change, or at least shows the possibilities of the usage of the space by the population that will promote the acknowledgment of these “empty” spaces, giving them several functions and, consequently, the territory management.

“..multifunctionality of the territory and in territorialities there is reconstruction of cultural identities, nationalities and ethnicities, also, integration movements of spaces” MOREIRA, 2007, 78. (translated)

Urban agriculture can be a development instrument of territories, through multifunctionality and the territorialization of promotion policies of UA as a contribution to the local and regional development of social groups.

According to Duvernoy et al (2005) .[8] due to multifunctionality

urban agriculture is increasingly recognized in its production public goods (landscape, insertion), that is to say, goods characterized the possibility of non-exclusion of users, making their management unprofitable for the private sector load. Compared to other "Producers landscape" as public parks and green spaces, Agriculture has the advantage of seeing its costs partially taken into by the market, thanks to its productive market function

(mainly foodstuffs). The urban agriculture is practiced, but if this practice was spread, in means of public policy, it could bring several benefits to the population, other than the mere use of collective spaces.

“Policies that support urban agriculture should consider the different functions that agriculture in the city allows, not being restricted to a merely productive approach, what is really common in projects that aim to maximize the production in community kitchen garden, planned on councils. Public policies based on projects that follow a strict pattern, which hire people from the community, imposes models of productive systems and determine the menu of plants to be cultivated disturb the social dynamics related to urban agriculture. Promoting agriculture in the city means to cherish the existing experiences, allowing the knowledge exchange, breaking social isolation and stimulating the creativity of people and community organization.” BRASIL, 2007, 27.[9] (translated)

Still, we should worry about models and patterns, which are normally developed from policies that disregard particularities of producers groups and the reality of each localization. These models and patterns do not enhance the production and the exchange of local seeds, but if this practice was encouraged it would reinforce the autonomy of groups of producers. So, building a public policy that supports urban agricultures must be flexible enough so that the variability of territories and cultural diversities be embraced and respected in their particularities.

Urban agriculture is a multidimensional concept that embraces production, transformation and services in a safe way to generate farm products (greenery, fruits, medicinal herbs and ornamental plants that can be cultivated or arisen from agro-extractivism) and livestock products (small and medium sized animals), reusing in an efficient and sustainable way the local input and resources (manpower, knowledge/practices, and land, water, leavings). These activities can be practiced on intra-urban, urban or peri-urban spaces, being linked to urban or metropolitan dynamics, as well as articulated with territorial and environmental management of the cities. The products destination is diverse and depends on the particularities of the area and producers, so they can be useful for self-consumption, commercialization or both situations simultaneously.

Urban agriculture is fostered by somewhat vague factors, such as urban poverty and food unsafety. However, UA can contribute for creating new functions of spaces within and in the limits of the cities, greatly embracing economic, social, cultural and environmental factors. [6]

Several goals can be embraced through UA practice, such as: improvement of environmental and territorial management, promoting gender equality and respect to ethnical and social conditions, combating poverty, promote food and nutrition safety, fighting hunger, promoting social inclusion and participative government.

The areas for effective usage of the population from UA can also be diverse, adapting to local reality and goals. Some examples are: vacant lots, slabs and roofs, backyards or patios, courts or parks, schools, health centers, prisons, buildings, railways side, side roads and avenues, band under high tension lines in Units Conservation, where a management plan allows diverse uses.

In 2007, the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger – MDS, Brazil, produced a picture of urban and peri-urban agriculture in Brazil [9], in which 11 capitals were analyzed, and in all of them this activity was found. It aims to clarify that UA is not only practiced in capitals or metropolitan centers, besides not being a recent activity in the country. There are places where UA has been practiced for over 20 years. But over the past few years, this practice gained more

technical, academic and political view, planning/aiming goals along the feasible reality. From the interviews with urban producers it was possible to state that a few of them identify themselves as individuals that practice urban agriculture. In Brazil, this activity has been practiced in Curitiba (PR) for over 20 years, in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte there is greater government support, e in Belém there is a center that supports about 40 thousand urban producers, besides other Brazilian cities such as: Porto Alegre (RS), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Fortaleza (CE), Recife (PE), Salvador(BA) Porto Velho (RO) Natal (RN) Campinas (SP), Goiânia (GO), Brasília (DF), where urban agriculture is developed trying to adapt to each historic, politic, social and cultural context, along with each cities interest and particularities.

Urban agriculture is a known and practiced reality around the world. There are outstanding practices such as done in Cuba where it is very strong. In Cuba

production was based on organic practices, which do not pollute the environment, the rational use of resources of each region, and direct marketing to the consumer.(Companion, Ojeda, Murphy, 1997) (translated)
[10]

Differently, UA is entrepreneurially practiced in buildings in Zurich (Switzerland), Montreal and Vancouver (Canada). It shows us that different groups can practice UA in different ways.

In the United States, UA is becoming a usual practice in low-income neighborhoods of California, San Francisco and New York. There are also records of fieldwork in London, Berlin, Paris, Rosario (Argentina), Cuenca (Ecuador), Macau (China), Vietnam, Uganda, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and in each place urban agriculture is practiced from its interests and needs, hence, along its own reality.

Considering the spatial dimension, it is necessary that the geographic space be analyzed in its complex dynamics, inter-relating the economic and political use of the territory to the social, environmental and cultural use, since both spheres play relevant functions in the production process of the urban spaces.

Thus, the features of UA are linked, as stated above, to the social, cultural and environmental particularities of a specific place in the city, arising as consequence the construction of several territorialities. Owing to the observed aspects, it is understood that it is indispensable to consider the particularities of each place when urban agriculture is implanted as well as in the development of public policies, since the geographic space is not homogeneous; on the contrary, it is a social instance. Otherwise, the actions that might be developed over and from the territories may not present the expected results.

The local social-spatial dynamics of the “new territorialities” corresponds to punctual variations regarding the usages and practices of the space by local social groups, which are configured according their specific historic contexts, and that i show urban agriculture constitutes itself. Wherefore, urban agriculture is one way of practice and using of the urban space that produces and uses the geographic spaces and must be considered by management and planning agents of our cities.

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