



THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF URBAN AGRICULTURE

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The eight articles selected for this special issue give an overview of urban agriculture initiatives that exist in a wide range of forms and in a variety of contexts. It should be pointed out from the onset, that several academic fields are contributing to this emerging area of research. In addition, social science based research conducted until now on the topic of urban agriculture is exploratory and descriptive in nature, and is at its initial stage of development. Indeed, this observation can be supported by the empirical emphasis of the research papers published in this special issue. The questions raised by the authors and the scientific literature review highlight the fact that urban agriculture is currently more a conceptual construct than an operational model. In fact, conceptual issues are seldom addressed in the papers. Besides, methodologies are essentially based on a qualitative research design focusing mainly on observations, fieldwork and personal experiences. The main issues discussed include building a case in support of initiatives, land development conflicts, and the legal, political and regulatory frameworks that define implementation processes and determine how resources can be accessed. The roles played by government and non-government actors are explored both at the local and regional scale in relation to urban agriculture governance, as well as land-use, heritage, landscape and real-estate planning, and urban and peri-urban dynamics. Although furthering theoretical development is not the primary goal of authors, the results from these case studies enable them to address the main challenges facing urban agriculture and its prospects and, through the lessons learned, to contribute not only to current discussions on the future of urban agriculture development but also to the advancement of theoretical understanding.

The results offer a novel outlook on current practices in towns and metropolitan areas located in Europe, North and South America and Northwest Africa. This provides authors with an opportunity to

take stock of the key issues in order to increase understanding of the way in which urban agriculture proponents succeeded in carrying-out initiatives. Some also identify new research agendas. In short, based on data obtained from experience and from field observations, authors provide insight on current practices and address the related issues, in particular land-use planning politics, financial support offered to food producers, needs and concerns of disenfranchised populations, food supply and security, agricultural land protection and environmental preservation. Questions related to governance are examined in greater depth, as well as the historical trends that have defined the functions and shaped the values associated to urban agriculture. The main elements that characterize the discourses held by the various actors, beginning with public officials, practitioners and proponents are further explored. Some authors even focus their analysis on the evolution of the visual representation and the conception of urban agriculture by comparing it with the transformative process of urban functions and values and the way cities relate to their surroundings.

These reflections serve as an argumentative basis for the promotion of a wide range of urban agriculture practices and for the pursuit of research and dissemination of results aimed particularly for institutional actors involved in land-use and urban agriculture development policy-making. However, urban agriculture impact assessment methods and tools are barely examined and the evidence base does not provide sufficient data to adequately measure the scope and the relevance of these practices in terms of economic, environmental, social, food, sanitary, but also urban design issues. Authors generally agree that broad-based research programs are needed to highlight the many factors that can influence, or even determine, the feasibility of various urban agriculture initiatives. By focusing research on these factors, results will advance

understanding of the real benefits. Finally, unresolved issues that must be addressed include determining which methodologies are the most suitable, and which scientifically based data collection and analysis instruments are the most relevant and effective. This will help define a series of parameters and indicators for the development of more rigorous conceptual and methodological research frameworks along with assessment tools used for validating hypotheses and measuring internal coherence. With a view to establishing an alternative to the descriptive and prescriptive approaches dominating the present-day field of study, subsequent analysis could help foster applied and fundamental research models that draw on analytical and critical approaches. Our editorial choices were inspired by this principle. This special issue thus presents an overview of the current knowledge on urban agriculture, which will certainly contribute to nourish the discussion towards this end.

Stefan REYBURN, Guest editor