

Urban Agriculture Conference: Notes

Session: Food Security

Topic Intro

1pm Afternoon Session: Food Security Through Urban Agriculture

Becky Ellis and Angela ElzingaCheng

Narratives

Food Security; Food Justice; Food Sovereignty; Food Systems

Food is Political, and our response to food security should be political as well. The overall message is that **issues surrounding food security provide opportunities for solutions, for participation, and for community building.**

Challenges regarding access, the environment, availability, adequacy, acceptability and agency.

LAND:

Becky and Angela discussed how land is a contested issue when it comes to urban agriculture (displacement, deforestation, and waterways). This is especially true in cities where there can be a lot of tension over the use of public space.

Who owns the land?

PEOPLE:

Both agree that Food Justice affects those populations who are most vulnerable: immigrants, the poor, and the elderly.

Restrictions regarding urban farming in the 19th century was about social control of the poor and immigrant populations.

'Poverty Reduction' is the new, big term being used by politicians.

Worker's Rights.

COMMUNITY:

Because the role of food is such an important part of our everyday lives, we interact passionately when it comes to issues surrounding food; this creates an opportunity to build community around a common goal.

Becky says that feeding a (estimated) population of 9 billion people is possible, but only from a bottom-up, small-scale farming approach.

Currently there is a large divide between farmers and cities.

Angela notes that there are multiple players, drivers and impacts when it comes to the connections involved in food systems.

ACTIVISM:

Urban projects help food justice to flourish. Examples are the Right To The City movement; People's Park in Berkeley, CA; Green Guerillas; Black Panther's Breakfast program; La Via Campesina.

Personal Stories

Becky discussed her first-hand experience in starting up community gardens in the London area, including the Byron library garden. She says that people have a lot of opinions about how we use our front yards and public spaces, and that community gardens allow people to pick and eat food freely, sharing in the community.

Angela says that urban agriculture provides opportunities to learn survival skills, followed by an anecdote about the time she learned how to kill a chicken from some of her co-workers. Her friend, who owned the chickens, is a vegan and hadn't thought about what she would do with the chickens once summer was over. Fortunately their co-workers came from countries where catching and killing chickens was a life skill they learned early on.

However, Angela was quick to note that survival and food skills are not food security, as it is a complex issue involving the points above.

Questions

Are there connections between rural and urban agriculture? If so, what are they?

- As mentioned in Angela's chicken-killing story, immigrant food knowledge about seeds, planting, pests, weather, disease and livestock can be passed on to rural farmers in the area.
- Urban farming also gives city growers a better understanding of large scale farming operations, and the challenges involved.

What about concentrations of pollutants in urban agriculture?

- Studies have been done on fruit trees that grow close to city roads, and yes, it is a concern
- Food grown in hydro corridors are especially suspect of PCB poisons
- EMF (electro magnetic field) tests must be done on a large number of community garden plots and it is very expensive
- Lead is a concern in cities, but rural farms deal with pollutants as well, eg: run-off in water systems
- Increased local food production is a higher cost benefit to the down sides

What is the definition of a family farm? Vs. an industrial farm?

- Large scale systems are usually tied to the corporate food system.
- Their practices are an important part of the definition. For example, do they employ migrant workers? Is there exploitation? Is there an improvement in the farming practices and quality (soil) from previous years?
- Small farmers often struggle.

Notes

As an 'urban farmer' myself, I thought this was a positive and encouraging conversation highlighting both the global issues concerning food security, as well as the importance of involvement at a smaller, grass roots level.

Access to healthy food should be a human right but the issues become extremely complex when those involved come together from varying age, race, culture, class, gender, experience, religion, and industries, just to name a handful.

What is clear is that people are passionate when it comes to discussing food politics, and it affects us all. It was especially encouraging to hear each speaker engage positively about their issues, and provide us with a sense of community and empowerment.