

Briefing Note on FAO Activities related to Urban Agriculture

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Rapid urbanization is causing fundamental social and environmental changes and posing new challenges, particularly in the developing world. In 1990, 45% of the world's population lived in urban areas; by the year 2025, this will have increased to 65%, 50% of which will be living in cities of more than a million people. In view of this, several units in FAO have been giving increased attention in the last decade to issues related to urban and peri-urban agriculture and environment.

Urban and peri-urban agriculture contributes to the food security and appropriate nutrition of the urban population, through the increased availability of a variety of foods. It is also a source of income for city-farmers. In many cities, backyard production still plays an important role in the household diet and contributes in particular to the prevention of micro-nutrient deficiencies through the production and consumption of fruits, vegetables and small livestock. Urban agriculture can therefore contribute to the implementation of the recommendations of the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) held in Rome December 1992; the Plan of Action adopted at the ICN advocated inter alia the adoption of sustainable food-based approaches that encourage dietary diversification through the production and consumption of micronutrient-rich foods, including appropriate traditional foods.

The promotion of urban and peri-urban horticulture is one of the strategic orientations of FAO's Programme on Diversification and Intensification of Horticulture Production. Its overall objective is to secure year-round market supply of fresh horticultural produce and increase the total consumption and diversity of fruit and vegetables by the urban population at large. Major activities aim at establishing intensive market garden systems in urban and peri-urban greenbelt areas with a view to making best use of limited land and water resources and creating income and job opportunities for migrants from rural areas through highly-intensive horticultural crop production systems and at promoting small scale household gardening and adapted technology for home based production units in poor urban areas.

Based on a series of case studies, FAO is also presently preparing a global study on the Opportunities for Livestock Management in Supplying the Rapidly expanding Urban Populations with Dairy and Meat Products, many aspects of which are relevant to Urban Agriculture.

A programme in urban and peri-urban forestry, launched in 1993, is promoting the integration of forestry into overall urban planning. Urban and peri-urban forestry can supply urban populations with wood and non-wood forest products, mitigate the negative ecological effects of urban sprawl and improve the living environment in urban areas. The programme aims to document and disseminate information and to provide technical guidance to member countries in the planning and implementation of urban forestry programmes. (see Annex for abstracts of publications on urban forestry).

It is essential to ensure that, as for any food product entering commerce, appropriate food quality control systems are set up all along the food chain in order to prevent micro-biological

and chemical contamination. FAO takes the view that the food safety issues and standards do not and should not vary with the source of food, and does not differentiate between the two.

In most cases, urban agriculture activities are particularly relevant to women as they often relate to their traditional role in food production and can contribute to their empowerment through increased income and social recognition. Women also play a decisive role in diversifying the household diet. Finally, as urban agriculture activities are generally being carried in the immediate vicinity of their homes, they are compatible with the provision of care to vulnerable family members, and in particular small children.

The links between urban and peri-urban agriculture and forestry on the one hand and rural agriculture and forestry on the other hand is a major concern of our organization. The dynamics between urban and rural areas must therefore be better understood.

Other FAO programmes and activities are directly relevant to urban agriculture (e.g. aquaculture, marketing, food-processing) and an informal working group is progressively building up in our organization to exchange information and discuss points of view regarding urban agriculture.

As a conclusion, FAO views Urban Agriculture from a variety of angles beyond that of urban food production. Issues related to land and water use and environment are extremely important. A dynamic and prospective analysis is needed to decide what is the best approach in the short, middle and long term.

Urban agriculture is mentioned in several World Food Summit documents, and in particular in "Toward Universal Food Security: Draft Policy Statement and Plan of Action", which is presently being reviewed by FAO Member Nations; the objectives of this plan of action are to assist households and individuals to meet their food needs, to promote gainful employment opportunities to alleviate poverty among both the urban and rural poor and to ensure that local food supplies are safe, culturally acceptable and adequate to meet the energy and nutrients needs of the population. A paper on Urban Agriculture is also being prepared for inclusion in the State of Food and Agriculture 1996 issue. We hope that in the coming months, these documents will stimulate reactions from our member states which would lead to further development of our activities in the field of urban agriculture and forestry.