



Urban strategies and practices for agriculture and food: six Mediterranean case studies

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Abstract – This paper discusses the role of cities and local governments in the implementation of strategies for sustainable urban food systems. In six Mediterranean metropolitan regions we analyze urban policies and agricultural practices, along with the political processes involved. The comparison confirms that cities are pertinent actors, capable of encouraging new practices and transversal governance. Nevertheless, questions remain concerning their ability to mobilize the agricultural community, and civil society in general, both elements crucial to the sustainability of any agricultural and food strategy. In concluding, we discuss the conditions that could lead to the emergence and implementation of sustainable urban food systems. Keywords – Urban agriculture, Agricultural Practices, Public policies, Urban food system, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean region is confronted with significant urban growth and increasing food insecurity. The population is expected to increase (from 446 million in 2000 to 570 million in 2025) and will remain concentrated in cities and along coastlines where it is strongly dependent on food imports, especially on the Southern coast of the Mediterranean.

Responding to this context, some cities have recently developed food and agricultural strategies from a food security perspective that seeks to renew and strengthen links with local agricultural production. These strategies involve various initiatives: the development of shorter supply chains and alternative food networks, the support of urban agriculture and gardening, public plans for farmland preservation, and actions such as local procurement for school meals or farm-to-school initiatives. Northern Mediterranean cities like Milan, Barcelona, and Lisbon have created and developed ambitious policies that address these food and agriculture issues. However these pioneers should not be considered representative of Mediterranean cities in general.

Depending on urban contexts, there is a large diversity of urban strategies addressing (or failing to address) agriculture and food issues. Do these examples reveal a transition towards new urban and agricultural strategies for food production and security in the Mediterranean? What causes these cities to take up the banner of food and agriculture issues, and act on them? What kind of food production systems and agricultural practices are being conceived, adopted, and implemented through these urban strategies?

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

To respond to these questions, we describe and compare the policies and practices related to

agriculture and food in six urban regions along the northern and southern coast of the Mediterranean. In each case, we approach the relationships between the city and agriculture through the concept of an “agri-urban system” (Valette et al., 2012). This perspective allows us to identify city-agriculture relationships, and analyze their dynamics, including the roles played by various actors and the relevant forms of governance.

Our results reveal three principal aspects: 1) The question of food is not necessarily a problem for the agricultural and urban actors in the metropolitan areas studied; 2) When seeking to spread and encourage the emergence of new food practices, urban governments have difficulty overcoming sectoral logistics; and 3) The link between emerging agricultural and food practices and urban policies is only just beginning to materialize.

With the intention of contributing to the debates of S22, we interpret our results in the light of social practice theory as applied to the study of transitions in urban food systems (Cohen & Illieva, 2015).

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD ISSUES IN MEDITERRANEAN CITIES

We compare six case studies² located in Southern Europe (Montpellier, France; Athens, Greece ; Pisa, Italy; Lisbon, Portugal) and the Maghreb (Constantine, Algeria; Meknes, Morocco). They illustrate the diversity of agricultural and food issues among Mediterranean agro-ecosystems. Our results show that the development of strategies for agriculture and food occurs much more frequently in urban regions of northern Mediterranean countries than in those on the southern coast.

The countries of the Maghreb have developed agricultural policies aimed at food security, but policies are concentrated on a national scale. These issues are seldom found among the preoccupations of urban and agricultural actors in Southern Mediterranean cities. Their urban policies remain oriented towards the development of social housing for the poor, or urban plans for economic development. The question of preserving the most fertile agricultural lands in metropolitan regions has surfaced, but has not yet transformed into local public action.

On the other hand, new strategies are emerging in Northern Mediterranean countries: the “Piano del cibo” of Pisa (2011, regional level), the strategy for encouraging urban agriculture and green space in Lisbon (2012, municipal level), and the elaboration of an agriculture and food production policy in Montpellier (2015, city-regional level).

These strategies are the products of local urban governments and share a common interest in proposing a global effort to encourage the evolution of food production systems. In some cases, they are

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² Five of these case studies were studied in the ANR DAUME research project (Valette et al, 2012). The Athens case was based on the work of Anthopopoulou (2013)



specific policies dedicated to urban agriculture and food for the city. In others, they are part of transversal governance initiatives developed to support urban sustainability. But how do these policies manifest in practice? What actually changes?

INTEGRATING AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES IN URBAN STRATEGIES

By placing the focus on urban and periurban agricultural practices, our results highlight the conditions and difficulties of "policy implementation" in urban agriculture and food.

In the two cities of the Maghreb, the practice of urban agriculture remains difficult at the intra-urban level. It is confronted with exiguity and growing fragmentation of parcels, as well as problems from contamination of water used for irrigation. In periurban spaces, development speculation encroaches on vulnerable agricultural activities. Although the large modern exploitations appear more resistant to urban spread, they are not influenced by the proximity of an urban market. They concentrate on exports at the national or international scale. A ruralurban dualism remains dominant: sectoral policies pit housing and agricultural issues against one another; and recognition of the link between consumption, agricultural land, and food security has not broken the hold of protection measures. Finally, the emerging question of green space in cities has not yet incorporated the agricultural question.

In Northern Mediterranean cities, agricultural practices are slowly changing. Sectoral logistics dominate agriculture in periurban spaces such as the vineyards in Montpellier and Athens, and the cereals crops in the valleys of the Tage and the Arno. Nevertheless, the ongoing crises (economic, environmental) are changing these systems. They are diversifying and adapting to urban proximity. The urban demand for local agricultural produce is leading to new agricultural practices, often at the instigation of newly installed farmers, or children breaking with the agricultural practices of farming parents. However, these new practices are still in the minority. The system's structure and the actors who govern land and agricultural issues continue to support established agricultural practices over innovative ones.

In the heart of urban spaces, citizens are developing new agricultural practices in a diversity of forms. In Montpellier, Lisbon, and Athens, collective gardens are flourishing. An increasing number of urban dwellers are exhibiting a desire to practice gardening as a component of the quality of life. This is notably the case in Montpellier where the gardening practice is motivated more by well-being than by food production (Scheromm, 2015). However, this trend is markedly different in cities hit hard by economic crises. In Athens and Lisbon, the new urban gardening practices

are directly aimed at food security for inhabitants in a precarious economic situation. They are developing in a more spontaneous fashion on parcels of vacant land in the city.

Stability, recomposition, and innovation characterize the practices and actors in urban agriculture.

THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING URBAN AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY

In light of our observations, evaluating the evolution in practices would also indicate the need to observe how local policy-makers incorporate these changes and innovations. We illustrate this in our case study of Montpellier, where our research team helped the city's elected officials elaborate an agricultural and food production policy. This work exposes mechanisms available to officials, such as urban collective gardens, farmers markets, school cafeterias, and commercial urbanism, and also the mobilization of economic operators and civil society.

In conclusion, we have seen that cities can be important actors in the creation of urban agricultural initiatives and transversal governance, however, questions remain concerning their ability to mobilize the agricultural community and civil society in general, both elements crucial to the sustainability of any agricultural and food strategy.

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