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Family farming

Is urban family farming useful for urban development? A case study in Meknès, Morocco

Urban farming patterns in developing countries depend on the urban development dynamics. In Meknès (Morocco), the presence of urban farming could be explained by the low spatial coverage of production activities—intensive indoor dairy farming, market gardening—limited to interstitial areas such as valley bottoms and steep hillsides. Small family production units run the farming activities, providing employment for one urban household member, sometimes in addition to a full-time or seasonal employee. Hundreds of Meknès households derive most of their income and part of their food from these activities. Urban agriculture supplies consumers with fresh milk and various vegetables through short informal distribution channels. Despite its socioeconomic impact, this farming system is overlooked by agricultural support services since it is run outside of the framework of agricultural development standards and plans. Milk, for instance, should normally be sold via agroindustrial milk collection services to ensure the product quality.



▲ Urban agriculture in Meknès, Morocco.

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Market garden crops are irrigated with surface water (wadis and springs) mixed to various extents with waste water, a source of microbial contamination that could be dangerous to consumers. This family farming is still tolerated since its social function is recognized by public authorities. The functions of this farming system and associated ecosystem services should be taken into account to initiate a programme of interventions geared towards improving its contribution to the sustainable development of agriurban systems: quality production, soil protection, maintenance of emblematic landscapes combining gardens, trees and housing, boosting urban dwellers' environmental awareness, provision of jobs and acceptable income for families. This however requires political involvement in urban development schemes and the same extent of support (financial, advice) as that provided to farmers in other types of farming system in Morocco.

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Urban and periurban farming provides an opportunity to adopt agroecological practices—the compost issue



▲ An unauthorized waste dump in Yaoundé, Cameroon—how can a constraint become a resource?

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Are urbanization and rural outmigration really a threat to family farming? There is no really clearcut answer. The presence of reliable markets and consumers in the vicinity of urban and periurban production sites is a sufficiently high incentive to promote local family farming.

The production and marketing of high added-value crops such as vegetables is suitable for small agricultural areas when farmers' homes, plots and markets are not far apart. There is of course a high pollution risk, but this could likely be mitigated by adopting and implementing innovative agroecological practices in the light of the growing demand of urban communities, which are better informed and aware of health and even environmental issues.

Regarding composting in Africa, much municipal solid waste is composed of organic matter. Raw material is thus available for the production of compost and organic amendments that could be used to enhance the soil composition and fertility. Studies under way by the internal research unit (UPR) HortSys are thus focused on determining the best institutional, logistic and social strategies that could be implemented to promote green sectors devoted to supplying family farms with alternative inputs or to complement conventional inputs. Urbanization, agglomeration and urban density processes provide a basis for viable alternative or complementary sectors to transform what was previously considered a constraint into opportunities.

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