

The Effectiveness of Urban Agriculture as a Survival Strategy among Gweru Urban Farmers in Zimbabwe

The Nyanga Declaration signed by municipal authorities in 2002 represented a turning point in Zimbabwe as its accommodation and official recognition of urban agriculture heralded a change in the attitude of municipalities. Urban agriculture has great potential to improve household food security and survival, but as long as municipal initiatives only officially accommodate it without providing proper facilitation, like rearrangement and reallocation of resources, urban agriculture will continue to face many challenges.

Rather than serve as a strategy for social inclusion and poverty alleviation on behalf of the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, it might then just be a new form of exclusion of the same groups. This discussion is based on research carried out in Gweru between September 2003 and November 2004 through in-depth interviews, questionnaires, observations, cases studies and life histories.

Why Gweru residents practice urban agriculture

The reasons for engaging in urban agriculture are influenced by one's economic status. The poor engage in urban agriculture to ensure that their families are at least ensured of three meals a day and a variety of cheap and fresh, quality food. Those who are better off see farming as a hobby or as having some cultural value. Data gathered in the above-mentioned study revealed that the majority (65 percent) of farmers in Gweru engage in farming because it ensures household survival. The remaining 35 percent either farm in order to sell the products or for cultural reasons. The reasons for practising urban agriculture are also related to the types of crops grown and field size. For example, flowers are grown to be sold, and if maize is grown on a plot larger than about five acres, the surplus is also sold.

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Increasing poverty (almost 90 percent of the population lives below poverty level) has fuelled interest in agriculture. This supports the general belief that urban agriculture is likely to increase because of persisting unemployment, retrenched civil servants, the influx of migrants and newcomers, sheer population growth, unemployed women, and a growing demand for abundant, regular and cheap supplies of good-quality food (Mougeot, 1994). The economic hardships have rendered mealie (maize) meal and bread beyond the reach of most households, which have resorted to growing maize as a way of ensuring a secure supply of sadza (thick porridge), a staple food for most indigenous Zimbabweans. In order to ensure household food security and a balanced diet, urban farmers also grow round nuts, groundnuts, beans, pumpkins, okra, cucumbers, rapoko, paprika, sorghum, watermelons, sweet potatoes, onions, carrots, fruit and other vegetables. With the scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, more and more people will have to turn to urban farming as an alternative. Grandparent-headed households find urban agriculture the cheapest survival strategy.

The study reveals that while the men have a diversity of reasons for agriculture, and many of them farm to get a variety of foods, the majority of women farm for subsistence and because of economic hardships. For most women farming is not only a source of livelihood but their main job, while for most men it is not their prime source of income.

Positive impact

Household food insecurity grows with the share that purchased food takes of the household budget; and the fewer the household's alternatives in buying food are, the more serious its insecurity will be (Mougeot, 1994). The high inflation rate that has characterised Zimbabwe in the past 10 years has meant that a bigger share of household budgets has been taken by purchased food, which most cannot afford to sustain. Urban agriculture has therefore positively helped to ensure food security in urban households. Almost 10 percent of the sample argued that with urban agriculture they are ensured three meals a day, which had been difficult to maintain previously because of economic hardships. Those who did not perceive a change in their diets were those who grow either flowers or crops to feed their animals. Some others cannot produce enough food in their urban gardens because the land is just too small.

Effective survival strategy

Almost 70 percent of the respondents maintained that urban agriculture is important for them as they use all the produce for household consumption. They also highlighted that the crops provide them with fresh supplies and a variety of food cheaply. Almost the same number of people produces less than 6 bags (50 kg) of maize yearly. About 18 percent produce 7-15 bags while the rest could not quantify their produce. Some rear chickens and pigs for sale and grow crops in order to feed their animals. The end result in all cases is improved food security since the money from sales can be used to buy household needs and provide extra cash. It can be argued that city farming has been effective in ensuring household survival though this is dependent on the resources commanded by different households in practising urban agriculture.

Challenges faced by urban farmers

Urban agriculture is not yet included in Gweru's Master Plan. However, the city has responded by looking for areas that can be allocated temporarily for urban farming. With the help of its engineers, councillors, department of housing and welfare and police, the municipality allocates pieces of un-serviced and non-urgent land yearly to residents who have registered/applied for it. These pieces of land only give usufruct rights that can be terminated when housing/industrial projects on the sites are pending. The land can belong to different people in different seasons.

The pieces of land, called Zvimunda zvedollar, are usually 70x70 metres. The rent paid per year ranges from USD 150 to USD 280. Although almost everyone can afford to pay this fee, the relatively poor, who are usually older people, are less likely to gain access to the land than the younger and relatively richer (and thus less deserving) applicants. This situation is fuelled by bribery and corruption among council officials.

The study revealed that to be considered for a piece of land in Gweru, applicants need to profess membership to the ruling ZANU (PF) party and attend meetings arranged at local levels. Even on the rare occasions when the government wants to allocate seed, individuals must register with their local councillor, who is always a staunch member of the ruling party. What this means is that anyone with a different political persuasion cannot get land. This then either forces people to belong to the ruling party or encourages pretence among farmers as they pretend to be supporters of the ruling party.

Another problem faced by urban farmers in Gweru is theft. Half of the respondents complained of theft of produce from their fields. They said it is useless to report the matter to the police, because the police say they cannot guard forests (fields). Officially there is no law for the protection of crops. Farmers are therefore left to deal with theft using their own methods, some of which can be fatal. In one such incident recalled by one respondent, a woman was shot dead by a farmer after being caught on the spot stealing some maize cobs. 70 percent of respondents do not do anything about the theft while 4 percent of the farmers reported that they

use "other" methods to deal with theft. Such methods include juju (traditional medicine) or scarecrows to scare away thieves, birds, donkeys and wild pigs. One woman reported that as a way of curbing theft, she harvests her yields quickly starting from the centre and progressing outwards so that thieves do not readily see that she has begun harvesting.

Another challenge faced by farmers is the inaccessibility of farming inputs. The poor who are lucky enough to get farming land might not be able to afford to buy treated seed and must therefore resort to recycled untreated seed, which drastically reduces the yield. This coupled with absence of fertilisers and organic manure means that the urban farmers do not achieve optimal yield.

With the scourge of the HIV/Aids pandemic, more and more people will have to turn to urban farming

Urban agriculture is also characterised by competition for land, which determines who gets land nearer to their homes and the size of land. Because of competition the most desperate farmers are those who have to travel the longest journeys (up to 8 km or more) to their allocated fields. These journeys are so physically demanding that the elderly who are supposed to benefit from the land end up forfeiting their allotments. The majority of those who farm far from home are older than those who farm in their backyards. These elderly people also usually work alone, which makes clearing land, tilling, planting, weeding and harvesting even more demanding. This drudgery can sometimes be alleviated by working in groups or co-operatives.

Facilitating urban agriculture

Urban agriculture is a viable activity that must be promoted through the protection of farming land and the crops of urban farmers. Currently urban agriculture is mostly benefiting the relatively rich, while the poor suffer from theft and lack of resources. Therefore, more must be done to formulate policies that will directly increase opportunities for the poor. The by-laws and regulations related to urban agriculture need to be facilitating (for example provision of machinery, seed and title deeds, which would establish some

permanency and security for farmers) rather than directive and controlling in a negative manner, as currently is the case.

The study shows that most farmers want more land (an extension of current farms or allocation within the city) for their farming activities. Some (31 out of 146) also argued that the government should provide seed, tractors and fertilisers at subsidised rates for the convenience of urban farmers. Thirteen farmers argued that they should receive extension support for the sustainable use of their land and another 7 farmers mentioned access to water (irrigation). Of interest is the small number of farmers (8) who mentioned that they want access to (rural) government farms. This demonstrates the reluctance of urban dwellers to relocate to distant areas for full-time farming. Also a small number (5 farmers) recommended marketing support, which is a reflection of the small quantities and little surplus produced.

CONCLUSION

Urban agriculture is already improving the food security status of households in every social class. It therefore has great potential to sustain livelihoods, if farmers are provided with enough resources and a sufficient legal framework (see the box on Bulawayo on page 42). Urban agriculture is not a temporary relief strategy but a permanent food security measure because it protects households from food insecurity. Realisation of this fact will lead to more serious and genuine support to urban agriculture and its role in alleviating urban poverty.

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School children at work in the school-based food gardens

The future

In the next year Ubuntu will be adding 12 new households to our backyard gardening project including a garden at the site of a 20-person home-based HIV support group. Two new schools will become school nodes of care and support, complete with food gardens and feeding programmes, bringing the total number of learners fed on a daily basis to over 2000. Ubuntu will establish a partnership with another local health clinic where food gardening and feeding will integrate with comprehensive HIV services. We are now working very closely with the Department of Health in our clinic partnerships. The DOH has been instrumental in giving us a mandate to work in clinics and recently in contributing funds and infrastructure. We also hope that our support groups will receive funding from the DOH to continue with feeding at clinics. This would be a great step towards financial sustainability for these support groups.

An Urban Farm Emerges

Beyond clinics, backyards and schools, Ubuntu has secured a 1.5 hectare plot, which will be developed in partnership with the local municipality as an urban micro-farm. The municipality will provide water, electricity, tractors when needed,

and some inputs such as manure and seedlings. Ubuntu will supply trainings, funding for employing a farm manager and seasonal labour, and the bulk of the inputs. The farm, whose primary focus will be vegetable crops and vegetable seedlings to be used at other Ubuntu sites, will be maintained by a seven member co-op of individuals currently gardening at the site. The co-op will employ and train on a seasonal basis many unemployed individuals from Ubuntu's case management system. In the medium term it is planned to develop a wood-fired bakery on the farm to provide our school-based feeding programmes with healthy fresh bread for breakfast, as well as to increase on-farm sales. The farm will make fresh organic vegetables, herbs and seedlings available to the residents of the surrounding townships at an affordable price. It will also be used as a centre for sustainable agricultural skills development in the area.

References

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ENDNOTE

Intake surveys at Ubuntu's holiday camps, after-school programmes and life skills lessons indicate that at least 40 percent of the children worked with have lost one or more parents to HIV/Aids.

BULAWAYO

Since the introduction of the RUAF CFF project in the city in 2005, the Bulawayo City Council has implemented a number of activities on urban agriculture. The city of Bulawayo had worked on developing guidelines for urban agriculture until 2000, but they were never really effectuated. Since 2005 these guidelines have been used in allocating land for garden allotments and other urban agriculture projects in the city. Also since then, the council has revisited its policy on urban agriculture to streamline it and to come up with a policy that addresses current issues. The activities that have been embarked on include the following:

- An Urban Agriculture Multi-stakeholder Forum has been established, to guide the development of an UA agenda for the city.
- A team of experts has been engaged to identify pilot projects. The Gum Plantation has been identified as the site for the pilot that is going to concentrate on wastewater use.
- Periurban land on the edge of the city has been identified. The land has been demarcated into 200 square metre plots for use by households. Other open land within the city has also been demarcated and is being used for agricultural purposes.
- Over 30 boreholes have been resuscitated and the land around them is being used for urban agriculture.
- A city UA strategic agenda is being finalised and will guide the development of urban agriculture.
- Several training activities have been conducted for the farmers and other stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of UA projects.

Currently the city council operates 12 garden allotments scattered throughout the low-income areas. These allotments have been parcelled out to the elderly, widowed and other disadvantaged members of the community so that they can earn a living and are properly integrated into the community. The city council provides treated wastewater for free to the farmers. It also provides extension services for the farmers.