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Social practices of urban agriculture in the metropolitan region of Thessaloniki

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Abstract

The paper recognises sustainable urban agriculture approaches for food provision, by comparing activities and eight socio-spatial characteristics in three case studies, in the defined urban context of metropolitan Thessaloniki. The study considers urban agriculture activities for food provision, as part of alternative food networks, whilst the research design is based on Social Practice Theory and the Multi-Level Framework. The study concludes with policy and planning recommendations for urban agriculture in the metropolitan region of Thessaloniki. However, the research design can be used in different urban contexts as it corresponds to the diversity of urban environments by treating the data holistically.

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1. Introduction

This paper is divided into four parts; introduction, methodology, results and conclusions.

- The introduction describes the core concepts of the article i.e. urban agriculture, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and food provision. Furthermore, it presents the problem description and the objective of the study.
- Methodology in the second part delineates the applied tools for the analysis i.e. Social Practice Theory (SPT) and Multi-Level Framework (MLF). The research design, the three case studies and the methods.
- Results are presented in the third part in table format.

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- In the final section, the article concludes with policy and planning recommendations for sustainable urban agriculture in the metropolitan region of Thessaloniki, as well as exhortations for future research.

1.1. Core concepts of the study

Urban agriculture is described as an industry which resides in and around cities [1-3]. It focuses on the production of food and nonfood products i.e. bee pollination, greening and leisure by extensively reusing human and material resources from an urban area. Furthermore, urban agriculture implicates a variety of activities for the production of food, i.e. cultivation of plants, tree crop, livestock, aquaculture, myciculture, apiculture and floriculture [4, 5]. For the needs of this research urban agriculture scientific boundaries are narrowed down by food provision concept. Food provisioning examines the sociocultural and environmental setting in which food consumption occurs [6]. The food provision concept is aligned with the variety of urban agriculture activities and spatial structures, by simplifying them into the following five activities: acquisition, preparation, production, consumption, and disposal of food [7]. Accordingly, technical skills such as growing, shopping, meal planning, food preparation and cooking are managed within the social context of practitioners as well as the broader urban environment in which they live. Food provision concept narrows down the scientific boundaries of this research in the five aforementioned activities and creates a coherent scientific framework.

Urban agriculture is considered as part of alternative food networks (AFNs). AFNs represent efforts to re-spatialize and re-socialize food production, distribution, and consumption by enhancing social equity and democracy for all members of a community [8]. Alternative food networks are an outcome of alternative food geography, which is a criticism of the contemporary agro-industrial food system[9]. AFNs are characterised as localized, specialized production processes attempting to trade by environmental, nutritional and health qualities [10]. AFNs create new relationships of association and institutionalisation to reconnect food to the social, cultural and environmental context of its production [11]. Moreover, AFNs are defined by specific characteristics such as the spatial proximity between farmers and consumers, the existence of retail venues such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture and a commitment to sustainable food production and consumption [12]. Understanding urban agriculture as part of AFNs means that urban agriculture is part of sustainable food transition in the urban context.

The implementation of urban agriculture activities occurs in different forms and spatial structures, which can be expressed by green roofs [13] hydroponic greenhouses, community and backyard gardens [14] school farms, food cooperatives and markets [15, 16]. The diversity of spatial structures is the result of the appropriateness of the nearby area [17]. Appropriateness of a field for performing urban agriculture is determined by its social, economic and environmental characteristics. For example, community and backyard gardens require access to free space and volunteers, whereas greenhouses demand cheap energy, a workforce and more professional installations. A major feature of urban agriculture is that it is characterized by the socio-economic profiles of the involved actors where urban agriculture activities are adjusted to the collective and individual needs [4]. Hence, economically sensitive social groups and people in times of oppression, perceive and perform urban agriculture for livelihood; whereas, wealthy social groups perceive and perform urban agriculture for recreational, leisure and for greening their surroundings. Obviously, the latter makes use of non-food services through the performance of urban agriculture activities [18]. Urban agriculture has a positive impact on the environment as it increases water absorption by greening urban surfaces [15]; while simultaneously, enhances species biodiversity and increases the potential of recycling by reducing the volumes of organic food waste through compost. Urban agriculture also reduces urban heat island effects, food miles and CO² emissions by providing food locally. From an economic perspective, not only does it provide employment in times of austerity, but also regenerates economic activities on the smaller scales by integrating local retailers, farm shops, consumer cooperative schemes and vegetable box schemes. Thus, urban agriculture activities develop a high level of multi-functionality either as a reaction to economic austerity and social pressures i.e. Victory gardens [14], Organopónicos [19] and Schrebergaerten [17], or as a way to survive the competition in real estate market and climate change [20, 21]. Green buildings are less likely to lose their economic value under external pressures and green spaces increase the quality of life [20, 22]. As a consequence, multi-functionality of urban agriculture activities responds to social, economic and cultural standards of each society.

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