



# Growing in Glasgow: Innovative practices and emerging policy pathways for urban agriculture



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## ABSTRACT

Driven by shared concerns about climate change, social justice and health and wellbeing, Urban Agriculture (UA) is an emergent global movement. In this paper, we present an exploratory case study of UA practice on the Southside of Glasgow, UK that traced the emergence and development of four UA projects. Data from the four projects revealed a diversity of practices, including temporary gardening projects organised by local volunteers, a community and market garden operated by a charity, a food shop and vegetable distribution service run by a social enterprise, and a permanent growing space for charities and schools provided by local government. UA practitioners in Glasgow have sought to re-purpose vacant and derelict land, build social cohesion, contribute to environmental and food sustainability and provide participation space for marginalised groups. Reflecting on future avenues for research on UA in Glasgow, we have identified two broad policy pathways that are emerging both at the local level and through national legislation in Scotland to harness local urban food growing and support UA. We conclude by pointing to a need to preserve the self-organising spirit of UA in Scotland as new legislation comes into force.

## 1. Introduction

Urban agriculture (UA) has burgeoned across the global north as a collective movement that seeks to address various social, economic and environmental challenges. It has proven popular in ‘shrinking’ post-industrial cities struggling with urban abandonment and long-term vacancy (Vitiello 2008; Gallagher 2010; Pothukuchi 2011), and has been championed as a solution to health and wellbeing problems such as obesity and stress (Davis et al., 2011; Van Den Berg and Custers, 2011), poor access to food (Vitiello, 2008), community fragmentation (Alaimo et al., 2010), and urban abandonment (LaCroix, 2010). Researchers have argued that ‘greening’ the city through practices such as community gardening can increase stagnant land values and help to build social capital (Glover et al., 2005; Schilling and Logan, 2008). As a result, UA has been hailed as a therapeutic and collaborative activity that empowers communities (Sempik et al., 2005; Viljoen et al., 2005). Once “the ultimate oxymoron” (Morgan 2015 p. 1385), UA has increasingly begun to involve a diverse *bricolage* of civil society groups, charities, local business and public institutions. Yet, despite these positive community impacts and the growing number of people and organisations engaged in UA, backing from government(s), both at the local and regional/national level, has remained uneven and, as a result,

UA has tended to occupy a precarious physical space in the city (Thirbert, 2012, Henderson and Hartsfield, 2009).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how urban agricultural practice has emerged and evolved in one part of the Scottish city of Glasgow. This exploratory case study offers an empirical examination of four projects on the Southside of the city to illuminate how UA has developed, where it is situated, and what types of state and non-state actors are involved in its practice. So far, this nascent movement has received only limited scholarly attention, notably by Crossan (2016), who theorise that UA in Glasgow has taken the form of a collaborative grassroots citizenship that supports urban regeneration and builds bridges between local and institutional actors. The authors of this earlier paper characterise this phenomenon as a form of ‘DIY Citizenship’ and contend that the citizens involved in this movement are engaged in the process of building a new ‘material environment’ drawn from their own unique cultural and historical standpoint(s).

Reflecting on the four projects explored in this paper, as well as the wider context for UA in Glasgow, we make the argument that local, regional and national governments have a collective role to play in creating the conditions for local UA projects to flourish as both grassroots and state-supported entities. Drawing upon the Glasgow case, we identify a series of emergent policy pathways for UA practice in the city,

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and demonstrate that local government can assume a diverse leadership role as a promoter, enabler and manager of UA. We also highlight how recent changes to the legislative framework in Scotland might widen community access to land for UA through the reshaping of local decision-making powers and the liberalisation of land ownership rights. Finally, we caution that governments at all levels must be cognisant of the grassroots character of UA and ensure that steps are taken to enhance the opportunity space for UA without curtailing the movement's dynamism with burdensome red tape.

## 2. Understanding urban agriculture

UA encompasses a diversity of practices including guerrilla landscaping, farmers markets, beekeeping and market gardening (Mendes et al., 2008), but is most readily identified as community gardening (Firth et al., 2011). In North America, the term 'community garden' is used to describe a wide variety of spaces, including allotments with plots tended by individual holders and gardens where volunteers work communally (Wakefield et al., 2007). In the UK, this definition is more nuanced because of an important distinction between the social organisation of traditional 'allotment' gardens and other UA practices (Firth et al., 2011; Wiltshire and Geoghegan, 2012). UK allotments are protected by various acts of parliament that date back to the early 20th century and the vast majority of allotment sites are located on public land managed by local councils. Allotments are divided into multiple plots and rented at a low annual cost to individuals. Most allotments are designated for personal use and produce cannot usually be sold (Firth et al., 2011; Mok et al., 2014). While their popularity has ebbed and flowed, allotments are currently in high demand and many sites have long waiting lists (Wiltshire and Geoghegan, 2012). Community gardening – in the UK context – refers to collective spaces where gardeners work together to grow food (Firth et al., 2011). Community gardeners draw strength "from the solidarity of the participants in a shared endeavour, underpinned by a common ideology made manifest through the garden" (Wiltshire and Geoghegan, 2012, p. 340). There are no statutory protections for community gardens and, as a result, they have emerged *ad hoc* and are operated by various volunteer organisations and social enterprises, including some small-scale commercial market gardens, that sell produce to businesses and people in the local area.

### 2.1. More than food production

The value placed upon collective action by UK community gardeners is emblematic of the wider UA movement where volunteerism and sharing resources are often important to practitioners (Glover et al., 2005). These characteristics have led some to argue that UA is as much a tool of community development as it is a means of sustainable food production (Thibert, 2012). Research conducted in Toronto found that community gardens are important places to tackle social isolation; as well as sharing food, those who were involved used gardening to engage in broader community issues (Wakefield et al., 2007). UA sites also precipitate physical regeneration by improving the visual quality of neglected pieces of land (Thibert, 2012), and can lead to the creation of new public spaces in neighbourhoods where open areas might be scarce and opportunities to connect with nature and eat healthily are limited. In a New York study, Francis (1989) found that participants who engaged in UA were not only motivated to grow fresh produce, but were equally interested in improving the visual and sensory quality of their neighbourhood.

Scholars contend that UA has an important role to play in addressing environmental justice, tackling economic development and alleviating poverty and health inequalities (Morgan, 2009; Vitiello, 2008) and, in some jurisdictions, shifts have occurred in the policy and regulatory landscape for new UA practices. For example, some local authorities have incorporated policies on local food access into

development plans, zoned vacant land for local growing, and established municipal-run community gardens (Henderson and Hartsfield, 2009; Thibert, 2012). Furthermore, 'food policy councils', which tend to bring together community and state actors, are growing in popularity as a way to shape local food agendas and take coordinated action on healthy eating and sustainable food production (Pothukuchi and Kaufmann, 1999; Blay-Palmer, 2009; Carey, 2011; Morgan, 2013). In some cities, local 'food charters' have also been written to affirm the shared views of public, private and community stakeholders (Hardman and Larkham, 2014). Urban food production initiatives also increasingly attract support from philanthropic funding bodies such as the UK's Big Lottery Local Food Programme, which between 2007–2013 awarded £59.8 million for local growing initiatives (Kirwan et al., 2013). These progressive initiatives are, however, the exception to the rule. In many places UA remains a grassroots movement that operates without sustained funding and "in spite of planning" (Thibert, 2012, p. 352). When public institutions do get involved in UA it is often on a case-by-case basis. For example, a city or local authority might supply a piece of land for a limited amount of time or choose not to enforce by-laws or other regulations that would ordinarily prohibit the use of land for gardening activities (Henderson and Hartsfield, 2009).

### 2.2. When bottom up activism meets top down institutionalism

UA projects are typically managed by community groups that operate on the political margins (Morgan, 2015). The participants tend to engage with the state and third sector funding agencies out of necessity to source land and secure funding. However, in those cities where governments have looked to play a more active role in the UA sphere, whether through a food policy council or similar initiative, new opportunities are being created for partnership and collaboration. For some community groups, this has meant a shift from "a politics of protest to a politics of co-governance" (Morgan, 2015, p. 1389). Such a transition is not always easy. Collective organisations invariably have different decision-making processes and governance structures to those preferred by state institutions (Jamison, 1985). Intimidating amounts of paperwork can discourage active involvement by volunteers who tend to give up their free time for UA.

Morgan (2015) warns that it would be premature to cast UA practitioners as equal partners in these governance arrangements, arguing that the positive potential of co-governance can easily descend into co-optation as NGOs sacrifice their radical ideas for marginal political influence. Ghose and Pettygrove (2014) further suggest that under the pervasive mode of neoliberal urban governance, radical groups must water down their ideals and adopt a pragmatic stance to secure limited state resources. They contend that community groups that rely on these resources can fall into the trap of becoming appendages of the state, thereby taking part in the translation of state policies into non-state practices. This stance is, however, questioned by Crossan (2016) who argue that UA cannot be classed unproblematically as a tool of neoliberal governance because of the grassroots genesis and collaborative character of many community projects.

By creating synergies between community gardens, small-scale commercial market gardens and community food bartering systems, some local urban food policy networks are beginning to challenge the "corporatist food agenda" (Moragues-Faus and Morgan, 2015, p. 1569) traditionally driven by national governments and major food producers and retailers. Research conducted by Wekerle (2004) in Toronto, Canada, found that local activists were able to form local food movements that contested prevailing food systems and created 'new political spaces' where grassroots activities could be linked to local, national and global centres of governance. The development of these new political spaces cannot, however, be taken for granted, and Pothukuchi and Kaufmann (1999) suggest that organisations like food policy councils, anti-hunger initiatives, or sustainable agriculture collectives are necessary to focus local government attention on local food and its

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