



Taking context into account in urban agriculture governance: Case studies of Warsaw (Poland) and Ghent (Belgium)



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of local particularism in relation to the global interest in urban agriculture (UA). A growing movement is advocating UA, but future prospects are limited by variability, unclear expectations, vague responsibilities and leadership in the UA movement. We wonder whether the poor understanding of UA governance is associated with a public discourse and academic literature that too easily adopt the generic and universally claimed benefits. We argue here that uncritical enthusiasm results in an overly instrumental approach to governance of UA with a main focus on stimulating formal (e.g., policy making) and informal advocacy (e.g., civic engagement in UA). We do not deny the importance of formal and informal advocacy in UA development, but rather claim that the potential of UA needs a more nuanced analysis. Study of the interplay between UA advocacy and a city's contextual characteristics is a worthy pursuit, as it may provide significant and more profound explanations for the divergence observed in UA developments. Case studies performed in Warsaw (Poland) and Ghent (Belgium) serve to illustrate the importance of context. The results suggest that neither case is likely to benefit from a governance strategy that only stimulates greater advocacy and institutional support. The inclusion of city-specific needs, opportunities and pitfalls of UA in the governance strategy can help to move UA toward its full potential. We suggest a policy-making strategy for UA that expands beyond the realm of food production alone. Ultimately, the aim is to steer away from assessing (and critiquing) UA solely against the backdrop of these generic success factors.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of urban agriculture (UA) has caught the attention of city authorities, citizens, academics and the media across the globe (Dimitri et al., 2015; Mansfield and Mendes, 2012; Morgan, 2014). Although food production initiatives in and around urban areas are not new (e.g. wartime gardens), the recent interest in UA reflects a reinvention of the concept in which new purposes are assigned to UA (Wortman and Lovell, 2013). The attractiveness of UA lies in its potential response to a range of urban issues that are often linked to the overarching goal of sustainable cities (FAO, 2007; Lovell, 2010; Mendes et al., 2008; Mougeot, 2006, p.10). As

a consequence of its popularity, a narrative on UA has emerged in popular discourse that is both uncritically positive as well as decontextualized (Lawson, 2005; Classens, 2015; Mares and Alkon, 2011). This narrative has been eagerly adopted by the media and online platforms, with headlines such as “*Farming and the city: How local-grown agriculture can feed the world's urban areas*”¹ (website of Milan World Expo 2015), “*There will be billions more hungry people in 2050. Growing our food on vertical farms or under radical new lighting systems may be key to ensuring they have enough to eat*”² (BBC) or “*Urban Farming Is Growing a Green Future*”³ (National Geographic).

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¹ <http://www.expo2015.org/magazine/en/sustainability/farming-and-the-city-how-local-grown-agriculture-can-feed-the-world-s-urban-areas.html>.

² <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20130603-city-farms-to-feed-a-hungry-world>.

³ http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/photos/urban-farming/#/earth-day-urban-farming-new-york-rooftop_51631_600x450.jpg.

The assumption that UA is a valuable goal in itself often results in an instrumental approach to governance. UA advocates tend to consider the actual development of UA policies and projects to be of greater importance than the precise form, objectives and impacts of such initiatives (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014; DeLind, 2015; McClintock, 2014; Smit, 2016). Policy responses at various levels generally situate UA in the field of food and agriculture, with a strong focus on preservation of farmland and the supply of local food (Cohen, 2012). The European Commission launched a campaign entitled “Europe’s Common Agricultural Policy: Taking care of our roots” to promote the link between urban dwellers and agriculture (European Commission, 2014). Under the societal challenges priority in the Horizon 2020 program (2014–2020) “Food security, sustainable agriculture, marine, maritime and inland water research, and the bio-economy”, urban agriculture has become a Food, Agriculture and Biotechnologies (FAB) priority (Arnold, 2013). Furthermore, all measures within the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP, 2014–2020) will be applicable to farmers located within urban and peri-urban areas who fulfill the eligibility criteria (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2014). At the international level, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) assists national and city governments in optimizing policies and support for UA (FAO, 2015).

But the benefits of UA are not limited to food production alone: it also provides green, open spaces; mediates the urban heat island effect; helps to manage storm water; enhances food literacy; improves health through stimulating physical activity and consumption of fruits and vegetables; integrates traditionally excluded social and cultural groups; builds community; reconnects agricultural sectors with urban populations; and facilitates participation and democracy in the food system (e.g., Draper and Freedman, 2010; Feenstra et al., 1999; Hodgson et al., 2011; Howe et al., 2005; Lovell, 2010; Nugent, 2000; Smit and Bailkey, 2006; Van Veenhuizen, 2006). The above examples clearly show how an uncritical popular discourse on UA and a policy focus on food production endangers the diversity, multi-functionality and richness that characterizes the UA movement. The first step to taking this diversity into account is generating an in-depth understanding of the policy implications. Current research easily adopts the generic, positive narrative and the instrumental approach to governance (Classens, 2015; Lawson, 2005). In general, these studies (implicitly) start from the assumption that UA initiatives are inherently benevolent. They ask how bottom-up and top-down processes can stimulate the development of UA initiatives by examining how civic engagement (e.g., DeLind, 2002; Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Levkoe, 2006) and urban planning and policy-making foster growth in UA initiatives (e.g., Cohen, 2012; Certomà and Notteboom, 2015; Halloran and Magid, 2013; Hardman and Larkhman, 2014; Lovell, 2010; Pearson et al., 2010; Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999; La Rosa et al., 2014). In accordance with this assumption, insight into UA governance, defined in terms of arrangements that effectively stimulate, facilitate and coordinate UA advocacy, becomes key to understanding how UA developments can be successfully advanced (Dubbeling et al., 2010; Huang and Drescher, 2015; Pearson et al., 2010).

Without underestimating the merits of these academic approaches or seeking to contradict them, in this article and in agreement with notable exceptions (Certomà, 2015; McClintock, 2014; Tornaghi, 2014), we seek to critically discuss the assumption that UA developments are inherently desirable and are mainly shaped by UA stakeholders’ advocacy. In particular, we address the current lack of academic consideration of the city-specific material and socio-political contexts in which UA advocacy and developments are situated. We argue that when these city-specific contexts are taken into account, differences in UA developments in different

cities can be better understood, and arguably, a different approach to UA governance – including broader policy-making – is needed.

We empirically substantiate our argument by discussing UA dynamics in the cities of Warsaw (Poland) and Ghent (Belgium). Remarkably, similar types of stakeholders advocate UA in these cities, but UA developments take on different shapes and content in the two cities, largely due to different contextual dynamics. These findings indicate that the meaning of UA governance is not universal or generic – as the understanding of UA as inherently benevolent suggests – but is rather dependent on city-specific circumstances.

Below, we continue by explaining our conceptual and methodological framework. We then empirically explore UA developments in Warsaw and Ghent by making an inventory of UA initiatives in these cities, and by discussing how UA advocates and context-specific characteristics interactively constitute these initiatives. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings in understanding the potential and the pitfalls of UA developments in different cities, and what UA governance entails by discussing socio-politically and spatially embedded public policies for UA that go beyond narrowing UA to food production.

2. The role of local particularism in the governance of UA

The complexity of the UA advocacy movement, involving different (state, market, civil society) actors operating at different governance levels and advancing different (sustainability) goals, makes novel demands on urban policy-making and planning processes. In light of this complexity and uncertainty, scholars have pointed out the need to identify governance arrangements and tools that can orchestrate the new creative multi-actor, multi-level, multi-purpose and multi-sector trajectories (Healey, 2004). As Hajer and Wagenaar (2003, p.3) explain, governments often face “open-ended, unusual, ad hoc arrangements” when seeking to further sustainability as a goal (e.g., Brodhag, 1999; Block et al., 2013). In many cases, city governments focus on single projects or experiments, when implementing UA policies, and support for UA is given shape through trial and error, instigating lengthy learning processes on how to support and implement UA initiatives. Strategic decisions on UA are mostly taken within a governance setting in which a convergence of circumstances determines the policy-making process (Kingdon, 1984), and decisions are only reached incrementally (Block et al., 2012; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Teisman, 2000). Explicit or clear-cut governance frameworks for UA currently remain absent, incoherent or unclear (Lovell, 2010). In many cases, policy making marginalizes UA as food production without the consideration of other relevant policy domains that embrace different aspects of UA.

We agree that an academic focus on UA governance is needed in areas such as urban planning and policy-making, participatory processes, civic engagement, and the institutionalization of UA decision-making processes (Pearson et al., 2010; Rosol, 2010). However, we assert that governance involves more than accounting for the diversity of needs, objectives and strategies of UA stakeholders (Pierre, 2000, p. 3–4), or identifying and adopting best practices and successful governance tools (Mendes et al., 2008). In accordance with the approach of Pollitt (2013), this paper makes a novel contribution to the governance of UA by considering context as a co-constitutive factor. The wealth of case studies on UA in a single country, city, neighborhood or site clearly indicates that variations in a given context sculpt the shape and content of UA developments. Nevertheless, academic literature on the governance of UA often either bypasses or merely describes the context in which UA developments unfold (Cohen, 2012; Garnett, 2000; Padgham et al., 2015) rather than considering it to be a constituting factor (for notable exceptions, see McClintock, 2015; Lovell, 2010). We suggest that

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