



Empowering Freetown's women farmers

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ABSTRACT

In Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, rapid urbanisation combined with the lingering impacts of the devastating decade long civil war (1991–2002), has left large portions of the population without reliable work or income. One response to this has been an increase in urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) which provides participants with employment, income and food security. According to local government estimates, women comprise around 80% of Freetown's UPA community, and many women rely totally on UPA as a livelihood strategy to feed and support their households. This article focuses on the experiences of these women farmers, and in doing so sheds new light on their vital contribution to Freetown's growing UPA community who are not thus far represented in published literature. Globally, women are also underrepresented in UPA literature, and as a result their distinct challenges are not well understood. Reporting on field-based research, this article identifies challenges facing Freetown's women farmers, including land tenure, access to clean water, limited capital for purchasing tools, fertilisers, and pesticides, and difficult relationships with government, NGOs, and other farmers. The manner in which these challenges manifest themselves in relation to women farmers, as distinct from their male counterparts, are identified, and opportunities for Freetown's UPA community to support and empower women farmers will be highlighted.

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1. Introduction

Global urbanisation, a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in the developing world, is generating an ever increasing demand for food in urban spaces. One response to this trend is the decision made by many families and individuals to grow crops and/or keep animals in urban or peri-urban spaces, a practice known as urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA). The extent to which UPA is taking place globally is unclear. In 1991 Smit, Nasr and Ratta, proposed that the number of global UPA practitioners was some 800 million (Smit, Nasr, & Ratta, 1996), a number that has been cited frequently in both peer reviewed works and grey literature. More recent analysis and modelling indicates that the actual number may be significantly lower, with UPA practitioners in the developing world numbering approximately 266 million (Hamilton et al., 2014), still a significant global activity. There has been no equivalent in-depth review of UPA in the developed world (Mok et al.,

2014). At a city, neighbourhood, or household scale UPA has the ability to be enormously important. UPA can act as a valuable source of food, income and employment for farmers and their families, as well as those living in the surrounding urban communities. These benefits may be of particular significance to poor families who spend a greater proportion of their income on food and so stand to gain the most from decreasing food costs and/or increased income (Orsini, Kahane, Nono-Womdim, & Gianquinto, 2013). UPA can also increase the health and attractiveness of a city by creating green spaces, improving local air quality, filtering water and soil, and reducing rubbish dumping (Brown & Jameton, 2000; Flynn, 2001; Mougeot, 2005). Despite these benefits, agricultural activities in urban spaces are at risk, as rising urban populations, and the resulting urban sprawl, diminish the land available for cultivation near cities (Mok et al., 2014).

Women are playing an increasingly important role in UPA globally (Flynn, 2001; Pottier, 1999), but remain critically underrepresented in literature, research and policy decisions (Hovorka, de Zeeuw, & Njenga, 2009). Importantly, evidence shows that from a livelihood and development perspective, women, who remain largely in charge of household needs, are more likely to

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spend money on their families, including children's health, nutrition and schooling, than their male counterparts (Mbiba, 2000; Mehra & Rojas, 2008). Supporting women in UPA therefore pays much higher dividends in terms of household health, education and opportunities than supporting men. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, women make up some 80% of UPA farmers according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS). This article focuses on the experiences of these women, as they navigate challenges including insecure land tenure, and difficulties in accessing clean water, capital, labour, and inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides. While these issues are not exclusive to female farmers, they do manifest differently, and often more severely for women than for men. These differing impacts are very poorly understood in the literature to date, both globally, and, in particular, in relation to Freetown, where no research thus far has specifically focused on women urban farmers. This article will also critically examine the role that relationships with other farmers, the government, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and the surrounding community currently play in supporting women farmers in overcoming these challenges and enhancing UPA as an important livelihood opportunity. Opportunities for enhancing these relationships and shaping them to specifically address the needs of women will be identified.

The field research informing this article was undertaken mainly in March 2014, and it is possible that patterns of UPA in Freetown may have undergone some changes as a result of the 'lockdown' associated with the Ebola epidemic that gripped Sierra Leone from May 2014 until late 2015. This crisis emphasises the need to provide livelihoods for women that are secure from shock, so that they are able to continue providing for their families during times of hardship. It also suggests a need for revisiting UPA in Freetown in the post-Ebola period to understand how women farmers have been impacted.

2. Methodology

The field-based research that informs this article utilised participatory methodologies based largely on those described in Narayanasamy (2009). The core ideal of these methods is summarised by Chambers (1994a) as: 'Poor people are creative and capable, and can and should do much of their own investigation, analysis and planning: that outsiders have roles as convenors, catalysts and facilitators: that the weak and marginalised can and should be empowered' (Chambers, 1994a: 954). Using information drawn from an earlier extensive survey of UPA in Freetown (Lynch, Maconachie, Binns, Tengbe, & Bangura, 2013), five key UPA sites, displaying a range of characteristics, were selected for the present study. Two of the sites, Lumley and New England, are located in the densely settled urban environment of coastal Freetown. A further two sites, Regent and Leicester/Gloucester, are located in the surrounding mountainous peri-urban environment. The final site, Poto Levuma, is closer to central Freetown than the mountain sites, without being in a densely settled urban setting (see Fig. 1). As a result, the research shows characteristics of both urban and peri-urban farming in Freetown. In addition to these UPA sites, research was conducted in several of Freetown's food markets (see Fig. 1).

Interviews (both formal and informal), and focus groups were the primary tools used during this research, with a total of 57 people participating, including members from five farming associations, individual farmers, government representatives and extension workers. Pre-prepared questions were used as a guide to structure interviews and ensure that all key topics were discussed. New questions were added in order to explore information in a way that made participants feel comfortable and willing to share their

knowledge. This flexibility allowed for the natural development of conversation between participants, and facilitated the collection of information that may not have otherwise been elicited.

Several methods were used during interviews and focus groups to help gather, explain, transfer and summarise information. These included undertaking transect walks, constructing seasonal calendars, and the use of site visits and observational notes. During interviews, 'snowball' sampling was used as key participants identified others who wished to participate, or who held important information.

3. Understanding urban and peri-urban agriculture globally

For the first time in human history more than half of the world's population is now living in urban areas (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014). Urbanisation is occurring most rapidly in the developing world, with annual rates of urban population growth as high as 2.43%, compared with around 0.67% in more developed regions (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012). If current trends continue, the West African region will be 60% urbanized by 2050 (Lynch et al., 2013). This shift in population location is creating new challenges for food security in urban spaces as demand for food in cities increases dramatically. Urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) is set to play an increasingly significant role in addressing the food needs of urban populations. Until relatively recently, UPA was not generally encouraged in the planning strategies of many African countries. In some instances, governments actively banned the practice due to misplaced health concerns, or the colonial legacy of legislation such as the UK's Town and Country Planning Act (1947), which restricted food production to rural settings (Boncodin et al., 2009; Brown & Jameton, 2000; Crush, Frayne, & Pendleton, 2012; Gupta & Gangopadhyay, 2006; Simatele & Binns, 2008; Tallaki, 2005). A significant body of research and new planning policies in Africa are now being generated around UPA as it emerges as an important feature of urban life.

Between 20% and 60% of Africa's urban population is estimated to be involved in UPA (Tambwe, Rudolph, & Greenstein, 2011), and larger households may be more likely to be utilising their increased labour potential and farming in urban spaces (Dossa, Buerkert, & Schlecht, 2011). Farmers use UPA in a range of ways. Some are engaged with it on a permanent basis, while others view it as a temporary or seasonal livelihood strategy (Tallaki, 2005). Some farmers have begun farming since moving to cities, while others come from families who have traditionally farmed in the area (Memon & Lee-Smith, 1993). Higher-income households are more likely to regard their UPA as entrepreneurial in nature, as opposed to predominantly subsistence agriculture, when compared with their lower income counterparts (Simatele & Binns, 2008). UPA usually occurs in marginal spaces (vacant lots, flood prone areas, or small spaces between buildings, etc.), which are likely to be unsuitable for other purposes such as building (Brown & Jameton, 2000; Mbiba, 2000). A wide range of crops, as well as some animals, are farmed in UPA spaces (Flynn, 2001; Hovorka et al., 2009). UPA provides a range of benefits for participants including food security, income generation, employment opportunities, and improvements in the habitability of urban spaces (Brown & Jameton, 2000; Crush et al., 2012; Flynn, 2001; Maxwell, 1995; Memon & Lee-Smith, 1993; Mkwambisi, Fraser, & Dougill, 2007; Tallaki, 2005). As such, it is a diverse and important livelihood strategy for many individuals and households, as well as an important source of food security for burgeoning cities.

Research evidence indicates that women play a crucial role in many UPA communities. As increasing numbers of rural women

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