



Farming the City 2021

A People's Convention on Urban Agriculture

April 16-18, 2021

Context

Countries across the globe are afflicted with crises ranging from economic to ecological, as well as humanitarian. With the onset of the global pandemic and the subsequent “Great Pause”, carbon emissions worldwide fell to the lowest in the recent past. However, it was far from a solution as temperatures continue to rise, glaciers melt, rivers run dry, the sea level rises, and there is an even greater push to revive the sunken economy but in the same old fashion. In the name of “development” and the “greater common good”, communities are being dispossessed, green cover reduced, wildlife being uprooted from their natural habitats, the state continues to impinge on common land and there is a greater push for privatisation.

Over the years there has been a complete shift in how we treat our environment and its resources, resulting in a situation where our existence is under threat with irreversible depletion in earth's resources, lack of clean water and air, global warming and melting glaciers, etc. There has also been a continuous push by corporates to plunder earth's natural resources, take over the food production and distribution system, introduce chemical fertilisers in the name of crop production and turn natural resources into commodities. In today's neo-liberal world, we humans are approaching extinction if we continue to exploit our natural resources and fail to find a sustainable solution to afflicting our environment, especially within and around our cities. Rapid urbanisation and structural imbalance in how we plan urban areas have brought us to this point that even the exploiters of nature and labour are trying to find “natural” ways to solve the contemporary problems.

Urbanisation over the years has thrown enormous challenges and the need for sustainable cities. Slowing agricultural production in rural areas has resulted in a large scale population explosion from rural to urban areas, which has resulted in increased pressure on the urban welfare system like food, sanitation, water, waste management etc.

The Government of India has been pushing strongly for the creation of ‘smart cities’, which on paper, aims for comprehensive urban development by applying ‘smart’ solutions that could further be replicated. However, such cities are by their design technocratic, exclusionary, exploitative and privatisation-oriented. On the other hand, lies a counter-force, in the form of civil society initiatives,

movements, and agitations, pushing for less corporatisation and more local self-reliance for meeting essential needs.

The ongoing farmer's agitation is one such counterforce resisting the state's attempts to corporatise agriculture through laws that ignore the interests of farmers- big and small. Allowing more control into the hands of corporates in the production sphere and even more so in distribution without any possibility of checks and balances is likely to deepen the exploitation of farmers and further reduce the diversity and resilience of the agriculture sector in India.

Why Urban Agriculture (UA)

To meet the rising demands of the city, more and more chemical inputs are being used to increase the yield in rural farming. The whole food system is stuck in a destructive cycle where higher inputs may give higher yield in the short term but result in diminishing returns over a more extended period. Urban agriculture does contain the scope of being turned towards sustainability. It can be seen as a "blank slate", with cities being well placed where entropy, i.e. outputs like waste, pollution, or "unusable" energy, can be turned into compostable waste and surplus heat into useful inputs. It is also well connected and contains the possibility of community involvement and grassroots innovation. Moreover, in the countries of the Global South, where there is a constant struggle for food and land, a new consciousness of "food sovereignty" has also emerged around which revolve other many issues of autonomy, freedom from global food chains, community resistance, safeguarding of diversity and heritage, place, self-reliant networks, etc.¹

Urban agriculture contains the possibility and space for "islands of unpredictability"² where unplanned and unstructured initiatives can pave the way for structure and a shared space of society and nature. For instance, "seed bombs" are thrown in nature to promote diversity where the plant decides where to grow.

Urban agriculture is deeply intertwined with the idea of food sovereignty, a sustainable means to ensure food security and put the power and control of resources back in the hands of the people. Urban agriculture helps create a self-sufficient urban centre, reduces transportation cost, storage costs and serves fresh products to urban people. Practising organic urban farming also plays a significant role in the event of disasters or supply chain issues. Most recently, during the COVID lockdowns, urban farmers were vital in ensuring the availability of vegetables and raw food for urban residents³. It refrains from a standardised approach and relies on the co-creation of knowledge by the people. In countries of West Asia, like Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon, urban agroecology has become a way to resist the corporate and state control of land, culture and identity. It has become a means to assert indigenous identity, tackle local problems using contextualised solutions, and use traditional and practical knowledge of agroecology. For instance, in Syria, civil society interventions of the 15th Garden Network push for community-led and controlled food production with continuous access to

¹ Biel, Robert. (2014). Visioning a Sustainable Energy Future: The Case of Urban Food-Growing. *Theory, Culture & Society* 2014, Vol. 31(5) 183–202.

² Carlsson, C. (2008). *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists and Vacant-Lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today*. Edinburgh: AK Press.

³ de Zeeuw, H. & VEENHUIZEN, R. & Dubbeling, Marielle. (2011). The role of urban agriculture in building resilient cities in developing countries. *The Journal of Agricultural Science*. 149. 153 - 163. 10.1017/S0021859610001279.

land, water, and seeds⁴.

In the recent past, the corporates have dug their claws deeper into the processes of food production and distribution, thus setting up an entire industry dedicated to the processing and packaging of food. Food has become highly commodified. Alienation between farmers and the product of their labour has gone to incomprehensible levels as food gets transported to faraway places through a myriad network of exploitative institutions. This alienation between food producers and consumers is more than evident in the ongoing farmer's movement in India. While an increasingly large population of rural India is coming together for organising dissent against the threat of corporate take over of farming, the concerns being raised by farmers are yet to receive serious attention and solidarity from the urban Indian populace who are the main consumers of the commodified products of farming.

Urban agriculture is not just about the act of growing one's own food. Production of food, which is of an adequate quantity and can form the basis of social organisation, is connected to protecting land by maintaining the integrity of the soil's structure and restoring biodiversity, and distributing land by changes in production relations⁵. It has within its scope the correct use and disposal of "[waste](#)", rethinking what can be termed as "waste", and how it is perceived in today's capitalistic urban society, and finally moving towards the alternate idea of waste being natural and integrating it in the production process.

Urban agriculture is not just being practised by the upper and middle class in their gardens and terraces. It involves people of various socio-economic strata, particularly [women](#), who comprise about 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force globally and in developing countries⁶ and products ranging from flowers to vegetables in urban and periurban fields, in farms, rooftops and backyard gardens, etc. Even the fisheries and aquaculture are an integral part of agriculture and a stakeholder in determining the land use pattern.⁷

Due to a lack of official data and studies and the diverse nature of the practice, it is hard to determine the exact number of individuals involved in urban agriculture. However, a study estimated that, in Delhi, about 10% of the food demand is met locally by urban and peri-urban farming, which provides for 15% of vegetables, 60% of meat, and 25% of milk consumed in Delhi⁸. The consumption needs of the cities are met by in-boundary and trans-boundary supplies often coming from faraway lands, thus contributing to a significant ecological footprint not just in the production phase but also in distribution. But most of the urban farmers do not own the land that they cultivate. Many of them are "tenant farmers", who have to enter into continuous conflict with the authorities who see them as "encroachers" on these lands⁹.

We need to look into urban agriculture, not in isolation but in connection with broader issues. The issues afflicting the urban areas need to be seen with the lens of sustainable development and interconnected to key areas like energy, food sovereignty, waste management, gender, fishing, food

⁴ Jasim, A. (2020). *Cities of Dignity: Urban Transformations Around the World*. Syria -Self Organisation and Food Sovereignty in war-torn Syria: The 15ht Garden Network. Pp 239-275.

⁵ Kumar S (1976) Introduction. In: Girardet H (ed.) *Land for the People*. London: Crescent Books.

⁶ Food and Agriculture Institute (FAO). (2011). *The female face of farming*.

⁷ Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India. (2019). *National Inland Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy*. New Delhi.

⁸ Ramaswami, Anu et al. (2017). *An urban systems framework to assess the transboundary food-energy-water nexus: implementation in Delhi, India*. *Environ. Res. Lett.* 12 025008

⁹ People's Resource Centre. (2020). *Diversity in Urban Farming of Delhi: Who, What and Where*.

distribution, market, and so on. Moreover, food sovereignty contains the answers to food security needs. It maximises the democratisation of knowledge, experimentation, improving food distribution through knowledge sharing and local food chains, using culturally and regionally appropriate seeds and practices such as agroecology, and thus paves the way for a sustainable future.

The increased interest in urban agriculture displays the desirability of plural and multi-faceted development, in which the physical and social dimensions of self-organisation interlock and feed each other. It reveals that rethinking of urban planning and politics is urgently needed and institutionalising urban farming can be the first step in that direction.

Organizers

People's Resource Centre aims to build new infrastructures of solidarity with the valuable fragments of learning derived from collective actions everywhere and the possible alternatives imagined by all people. The initiative seeks to explore the possibilities of bringing the resources back into the people's powerful control and to understand whether and how that can eradicate the most persistent problems such as hunger, homelessness, ambient pollution, and social injustices based on caste, gender, and religion. PRC engages with movement groups and communities in the places with the ongoing or potential struggle over resources, and regularly undertakes policy monitoring, research and documentation, and grassroots networking to generate resources for collective resistance and creative action.

Institute for Democracy and Sustainability has carved out a niche for itself among the people-centric organizations while working actively on the issues of social transformation including sustainable urban transport, equal road rights, right to livelihood and urban agriculture for the last three decades. IDS believes that providing opportunities for employment, housing and education based on the quality and egalitarian ethos is the prerequisite of developing an environment-friendly, socially inclusive and eventually, a throbbing city. IDS believes that it is pertinent to accord priority to local and decentralized production and distribution systems. IDS is a constituent member of National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), Sustainable Urban Mobility Network of India (SUMNet), Car-free Network and is associated with several national and international forums.

Technical Support

Transportation Research and Injury Prevention Programme (TRIPP), IIT Delhi is an interdisciplinary programme focusing on the reduction of adverse health effects of road transport. TRIPP attempts to integrate all issues concerned with transportation in order to promote safety, cleaner air, and energy conservation. Faculty members are involved in planning safer urban and inter-city transportation systems, and developing designs for vehicles, safety equipment and infrastructure for the future. Activities include applied research projects, special courses and workshops, and supervision of student projects at postgraduate and undergraduate levels. Projects are done in collaboration with associated departments and centres at IIT Delhi, government departments, industry and international agencies.