

Editorial

Urban Gardens and Communities: An Open Debate

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There is a debate concerning the concept of sharing in the area of economy and practices of social life [1]. Belk [2] defines sharing as “the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use”. Sharing tends to be a communal act that links us to other people. In fact, initiatives of social sharing can concern groups of individuals who feel that they share something in common such as a place and a wish to share their resources [3]. While these initiatives may be not-for-profit or for profit, they should aim to serve the community in advancing more sustainable futures of the cities [4]. The sharing frequently found in such societies improves the efficiency of resource use, increases security by the sowing seeds of reciprocal obligations, or enhances the status or breeding opportunities of those who share [1]. Critics denounce such practices as being about economic self-interest rather than the sharing of social aspects [5].

The space of community gardens has multiple expressions in images, memories, emotions, identity, and everyday practice [6]. The most physically salient aspect of the symbolic meaning of the gardens is their constitution as carriers of cultures within the city such as culinary preferences, customs, foodscapes, and social interactions.

The study is embedded in the framework of urban food system research. Urban food systems are complex networks of production, distribution and consumption. They are also defined as localized food systems where producers and consumers seek alternatives from mainstream globalized food chain which dominate in developed countries [7]. To explore community gardens as places to practice active citizenship and consider specific areas of study in Italy. It aims to relate spaces, practices and imaginaries of foodscapes by analyzing the genesis and the state of art in the cities.

The study highlights the practice of urban agriculture, especially community gardens. An example as case study is the municipality of Catania. In the South of Italy, an urban context characterised by few public green spaces. Catania is a city characterized by medium socio-economic level development levels and also lacks public green spaces and services where urban agriculture and community gardening efforts can develop. The city’s municipal area is 180 km² with a population of approx. 294,000 inhabitants, according to the last national census (2011). The city is located along the coast where the summers are long and hot. The entire area is suffering from major problems, especially traffic congestion due to an insufficient road network. In the municipality of Catania an example of the

community garden is located in the suburbs of the city, Librino, which hosts the largest social housing scheme built in the late 1970s with 36.000 inhabitants. This community gardening effort primarily aims to respond to current social aspects. Recently, in Librino, the municipality of Catania initiated a pilot project. It aims to create new social public green spaces (more than 3.5 ha) that are assigned to associations or private persons to cultivate small land pieces. Part of these areas will be available for urban agriculture that contributes to the production of food at local level, and at the same time reduces maintenance costs for the municipality. Each garden has free water for irrigation and assignees will be able to buy seedlings at subsidized prices, bulbs, seeds, saplings, fertilizers and natural pesticides. The social community in their activities are followed by the Office for Ecology with the cooperation of agriculture associations. For each garden - assignment lasts four years with renewal - must be paid an annual fee established by the municipality. The lots for community gardens, reserved for retirees and people in socially disadvantaged conditions, as well as those for the families do not exceed 200 square meters. For educational-training gardens and associations, which will take place theoretical activities and practices, can be assigned to neighbouring lots, up to a maximum of 2,000 square meters. The trade is only allowed to cover the costs of training-work projects. The gardens will be cultivated directly by beneficiaries or their family, without paid work.

Thus, even though Catania has not invested significant effort in community gardens in the past, these attempts seem to be good examples of such initiatives. It is a form of community engagement creates from municipality of Catania, and a good example of the right to public space but it’s not enough developed, as sites for demonstrating the urban environment as “the commons”. They represent a “social use-value”.

Today it’s relevant to discuss the role of community-based initiatives in the creation of sustainable green cities. Also, based on some practical implications it will be presented related to the monitoring of policy effects related to community gardens, entrepreneurial activities and urban sustainability. However, given the novelty of the phenomenon and the exploratory nature, there are as yet no rigorous methodologies or functions determining success and thus further studies are need. This is a first step in exploring the field by providing a review of the relevant literature on the topic and also providing a starting point for future studies.

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