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Local Actors Building Urban Food Strategies in West Africa and South America

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Mamadou's production of cabbages in Bobo-Dioulasso. Photo by Ophélie Robineau

Feeding cities is assuming ever more importance on the political agenda. But beyond the required willingness of political actors to develop urban food strategies, initiatives driven by local actors also play a central role in the long-term construction and consolidation of these strategies. Through describing experiences in West Africa and South America, we emphasise that taking into account informal relationships in designing public policies can improve food production and distribution in urban areas.

Introduction

Because of their lack of visibility, informal initiatives and informal interactions among local actors are seldom considered in support policies and actions that target the food issue. It is, however, of importance to take them into consideration in order to design appropriate urban planning policies and food systems suited to local community expectations. Take for instance the example of two southern cities situated in contrasting contexts: Bobo-Dioulasso (500,000 inhabitants, in Burkina Faso) and Mar del Plata (700,000 inhabitants, in Argentina). Informal interactions are part of everyday practices among food producers, buyers,

wholesalers, retailers and consumers in both cities. These interactions are developed to fill the gaps of the formal system in providing a sustainable livelihood for everyone and they go beyond economic issues, involving social and cultural factors. Each case study provides interesting examples of how actors in the local food system develop initiatives that have little or no political visibility yet meet local expectations.

Urban food production in Bobo-Dioulasso: a set of informal interactions

In sub-Saharan Africa, urban and periurban agriculture (UPA) is practiced by many families. However, this is threatened by rapid urbanisation processes and is perceived as inconsistent with the vision of urban modernity that prevails in urban development policies. In Bobo-Dioulasso, international organisations (such as RUAF, IAGU and UN HABITAT) have developed projects in collaboration with the city council to support the creation of collective gardens on public land. In addition, urban farming activities that already exist—which represent the very large majority—are tolerated but receive little or no formal political support because public actors take no interest in supporting them, and their legal status is unclear. Nonetheless, thousands of farmers find ways to make a living from agriculture within the city.

Two important types of market-oriented farming are vegetable production (about 1,200 urban market gardeners) and pig

rearing (more than 500 farms). Access to inputs is essential to developing these activities. Through localised social networks and informal arrangements, farmers ensure input supply in sufficient quantities and at low cost, in a context of high demand and no formal options. As movement is difficult (especially for carts in the city centre) and the cost of transport is high, market gardeners and livestock holders prefer to source supplies nearby.

Market gardeners require large quantities of organic manure to maintain soil fertility. To ensure they get it, they make informal arrangements with livestock holders and with actors in urban waste collection. These arrangements are based on interpersonal relationships and on trust. All parties benefit from this system: market gardeners, who guarantee their own supply of manure; livestock holders, who can dispose of animal waste unpleasant to their neighbours; and cart drivers, who make a living from transporting this material.

Pig farmers feed their animals with food residues, notably brewers' grains. They have oral contracts with traditional and industrial breweries that ensure they will get sufficient quantities to feed their pigs (an average of five pigs per farm have to be fed daily). This arrangement benefits three parties: farmers ensure their supply; brewers dispose of a product that rots very quickly; and the municipality does not have to be in charge of managing this residue.

The involvement of public actors in informal negotiations has been crucial to the permanence of urban agriculture in

Bobo-Dioulasso. For example, there are negotiations between urban pig holders and the municipality to circumvent the municipal order that prohibits rearing pigs within the city; in the absence of economic alternatives for poor families, urban authorities allow them to generate income through pig rearing. However, formal land-planning actions question, in the medium term, the permanence of suitable spaces for UPA since they threaten the network of access to organic inputs for market gardeners – because future land planning will isolate market gardeners from pig breeders and urban waste providers. Public policies have reflected awareness of informal arrangements to maintain these essential socio-spatial interactions.

Food distribution in Mar del Plata: informal adaptation to local community expectations

In Argentina, various vegetable distribution channels coexist. The dominant channel involves conventional producers (i.e., using agrochemical inputs) and major volumes sold through the circuit “wholesale markets–small retailers”. This channel meets needs in terms of volumes and low prices but is increasingly farther removed from the community's expectation regarding food quality and health. Therefore an alternative channel is being developed through institutional programmes. It involves small-scale agro-ecological producers and direct selling. However, it represents small volumes and is not accessible to many producers (due to lack of systematisation of knowledge, a bottleneck for commercialisation), nor to the large majority of consumers (due to reduced availability and often higher prices). Thus, intermediary forms of production and distri-



Piles of cow dung ready to be sold, area of the livestock market of Bobo-Dioulasso. Photo by Ophélie Robineau

bution persist or emerge that seem better suited to community expectations. This is what happens in Mar del Plata, a city surrounded by the second main horticultural belt of Argentina.

Mar del Plata hosts three wholesale markets. Two are located outside the city. One, which is smaller, stands within the city. Its localisation in the urban space makes it nearly inaccessible for large trucks, and large volumes can hardly come in or go out. For this reason, most producers/retailers operating through this wholesale market are, on average, smaller-scale than the ones operating through the two other markets. Urban location and alternative functioning (it opens in the afternoon whereas the two others do not) are seen as a strategies for competition with other wholesale markets. Small retailers enjoy certain advantages: a) they can go and buy small quantities at any time without spending time and money in transport, and b) they often do not have good transport services for going outside the city (many do not have a driving licence or vehicle insurance, and prefer using secret routes within the city rather than main roads with a higher probability of inspection). Although no data can confirm it, some municipal agents assume that the vegetable supply in Mar del Plata is abundant thanks to the existence of this wholesale market (about 3,000 vegetable stores identified). Also, many small retailers agree that vegetable quality is higher in the city: smaller-scale producers (perceived as having less intensive practices and better harvesting practices), face-to-face transactions as well as anchoring in the local food supply are mentioned as possible explanations for such different quality in this wholesale market. Its suitability to local community expectations means that this wholesale market plays an important role in the local food system. Be that as it may, there is a political scheme to move wholesaling activities to urban peripheries, which casts a shadow on the future of this market.

Farmer and consumer preoccupations with food prices and food quality have led some farmers located near urban settlements to develop direct selling through informal channels. These channels do not increase the demand for products free of agrochemicals; however, direct contact with consumers is an incentive to use less agrochemical inputs. It is thus a win-win situation. Small-scale farmers are better anchored in their neighbourhood through social interactions, they improve their farming practices without being constrained to specifications, and they have a better income; consumers trust producers for the quality of vegetables they buy at a lower price.

Discussion and conclusion

Both cases illustrate that informal arrangements and interactions among actors are key to the existence of forms of production/distribution that match local actors' expectations. In Bobo-Dioulasso, UPA maintains and develops through a set of informal processes involving both local stakeholders and public actors. These processes ensure the functioning of the local food system through the creation of a synergy between city, agriculture and food, and ensure the integration of actors of limited economic means.

In Mar del Plata, public actors and public policies support strong and well-identified models – conventional and alternative ones. Intermediary initiatives do not achieve visibility in that political landscape and receive little or no political support; they are developed and maintained through local actors' practices, apart from institutional programmes or political support, and bear more local community expectations than a political vision. The flexibility of these intermediary initiatives meets producer, reseller and consumer expectations. However, these initiatives remain scattered and fragile in the face of urban policies and rapid transformations in the urban fringe.

In both cities, informal initiatives enhance local small-scale food production, food quality and integration of actors with limited economic means. Spatial proximity and social interactions are key to the development of these initiatives. Both experiences demonstrate the capacity of local actors to face challenges and improve their practices. This calls for more consideration of local actor practices to promote and support the social construction of sustainable urban food systems. Although formal processes such as urban food policies are required to construct sustainable urban food systems, it is essential that they neither challenge nor disregard local informal processes that offer the necessary flexibility to urban constraints. Promoting land planning strategies that integrate the local food issue therefore calls for a global approach that takes into account these informal initiatives and local practices.

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