



GLOBAL VIEWS OF LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Reflections on the growing worldwide local food movement

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From incidental to essential: Urban agriculture in the Middle East

Published online December 2010

Citation: Zurayk, R. (2010, December). From incidental to essential: Urban agriculture in the Middle East. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 1(2): 13–16. doi:10.5304/jafscd.2010.012.012

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There is a huge mall overflowing with high-ticket brands right opposite my house, in one of the busiest neighborhoods of Amman, the capital of Jordan. It sits exactly where, eight years ago, I helped an old farmer harvest his wheat field. But this is not an unusual event in Amman. Less than a mile away, in the posh neighborhood of Abdoun, there is a carefully tended field of cauliflowers opposite one of the European embassies. A couple of miles away, in the valley behind the U.S. Embassy, a flock of sheep grazes the barren steppe.

Amman, like many metropolises of the Developing World, is in full expansion. And as elsewhere, this

expansion is taking place over agricultural lands. As a result, relics of farmland end up locked between high rises, villas, and malls. These are temporary spaces, and their geographic location is guided by real estate speculation rather than by planning and design. While these lands continue to contribute to the local food system, they shrink every year as the city continues its ruthless takeover of the rural landscape and real estate prices continue to rise in synchronicity with buildings and towers.

Real estate is a major driver of the economy in many countries of the Middle East, as in other developing nations. It is one of the main barriers to the development or implementation of zoning and planning regulations that would make urban agriculture more than a fortuitous and temporary use of space. The story of how land came into private ownership in some Middle Eastern countries offers an interesting insight into the marginalization of farming at the rural-urban interface. Much of these lands were under a communal tenure regime. This is the case with the rangelands of the Arabian steppe, the Badia, but also with the farmlands

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surrounding villages where farmers were able to claim access to communal lands by reclaiming them or by “reviving” them. Colonial rule in its multiple forms (direct colonization, protectorates, mandates) brought “modern” concepts and principles for governance that were not directly applicable but were made to seem universal. Among these were state simplifications¹ (Scott, 1998) and centrally managed cadastral registers, which allowed local elites to grab vast areas of the commons. The resulting landscape dissection² (Hobbs, Galvin, Stokes, Lackett, Ash, Boone, Reid, & Thornton, 2008), along with the creation of increasingly hermetic borders of nation states, was detrimental to agriculture and especially to mobile pastoralism in the Middle East. This was felt most strongly in the surroundings of the mushrooming cities and expanding towns.

In the post-colonial period, real estate became a very efficient way of capturing the surplus generated from nonproductive economic sectors, such as remittances. Speculation drove prices upward, and land became a commodity and a capital asset, the value of which is determined by its return on investment. Agriculture, traditionally a low-return sector, stood no chance. The city invaded its surroundings, both physically and ideologically. Much of the farmland that remains locked into the expanding conurbation is just green space given a reprieve. This is what I refer to as accidental urban agriculture.

¹ Ideas and actions aimed at improving human condition through rationalization and the creation of social order (see Scott, 1998).

² The dissection of the earth’s surface into spatially isolated parts.

State simplifications and the falling of communal space into private hands did not always happen smoothly. Customary land users have often voiced their complaints and protested what they saw as a robbing of their customary rights. In 1983, in

Jordan again, the Bani Hassan Bedouin³ tribe collectively stood up to the state for land rights, but was repressed (Tell, 1993). They ended up, like many of the Bedouins, locked in the anteroom of the next urban expansion zones, between malls, villas, and towers. They still raise sheep and goats, but they now rely on imported feed and on state subsidies. Their main market is the meat market of the adjacent towns.

They know their presence is temporary, as is their food system. But they will stick with it until the next wave of displacement.


There is, however, in the same region, a totally different approach to urban agriculture. As a result of the conflicts and wars that have reshaped the region in the 20th century, a significant part of the population has been turned into refugees, often in their own countries. International aid has been a main source of food for refugees. However, the rations often proved insufficient, inadequate, or inappropriate, and lacked fresh and green products. In spite of the limited space available, people have taken to farming in order to supplement their diets and their incomes. Reports from Gaza show that food production on rooftops in refugee camps is an important activity that provides better nutrition and alternative activities (Bartlett, 2010). In a recent issue of *Urban Agriculture* magazine, Adam-Bradford and coworkers drew on experiences from populations that have experienced serious internal displacement to show the important role played by urban agriculture in relief, rehabilitation, and

³ The mobile pastoralists of Arabia.

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development (Adam-Bradford, Hoekstra, & van Veenhuizen, 2009). It is where space is the most limited, paradoxically, such as in refugee camps, that we see urban farming imposing itself as a necessity. But in reality, this should be hardly surprising: the origin of the allotments that give so much joy to urban farmers in much of Western Europe today goes back to a planned British strategy for family food production during WWII, just as victory gardens were encouraged in the U.S. It is much later that allotments became integrated into urban green space and into leisure activities.

However, things may be changing in many Middle Eastern countries as a drive toward regional green planning slowly starts to take hold. The city of Erbil in Iraq recently completed a plan for the green belt surrounding the city that retains a large proportion of farmland in order to foster local food systems and feed the city. Perhaps we will see,

in the next decade, urban agriculture turning from incidental to essential. 

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