

# Introduction

## Civil Society and Urban Agriculture in Europe

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**Abstract:** This special issue comprises articles by social and environmental scientists, most of whom participated in a working group on governance models and policy contexts of the COST Action TD1106 Urban Agriculture Europe during the period 2012–2016. All have a particular interest in the potentialities of urban agriculture as mediated through civil society actors to contribute to, shape, and transform urban policies in the intersecting fields of land use and access; food and urban ecosystems; education and environment; and history, heritage, and cultural practice. The collaborative, interdisciplinary, and bottom-up character of the contributions broadens and deepens our knowledge of urban agricultural practice across Europe.

**Keywords:** citizen empowerment, civil society, crisis, public space, scholar-activist, urban agriculture

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This special issue is devoted to how European civil society, working from the ground up, helps to conceive, create, and cultivate diverse forms of urban agriculture (UA). The articles that form this special issue demonstrate an explicit concern with the *modus operandi* of civil society groups and actors who favor a more bottom-up style of action predicated upon the involvement of a range of actors who demonstrate high levels of motivation around sustainability and food security, and who engage in both traditional and innovative practices. Contrary to common perception, the enactment of urban agriculture across the continent of Europe and beyond is not simply an atavistic practice beloved of the solitary (male) plot holder tending the land with little else in mind other than growing a prizewinning marrow. As this collection of articles shows, UA is implicated in a range of civil society activities that include (but are not confined to) community food production, community development, ecological education, partnership generation, political insurgency, and strategic planning.

UA has the demonstrated potential to bring a wide cast of actors into interaction with each other across both horizontal and vertical scales. Moreover, disparate (and sometimes conflicting) groups engage





in a range of mobilization activities that seek to secure access to nature for citizens in the contemporary city. In different spatial contexts and at different points in time, the configuration of market, state, and civil society forces create different kinds of alignments with different consequences. As a result, UA, like many other domains of everyday life in the urban region, produces “a complexly intertwined social reality in which integrations and boundaries, cohesions and exclusions cannot be read off from simple ‘maps’ of organizational structures” (Healey 2006: 303).

A key objective of this collection is to explicate the complex and multifaceted elements of UA as conceived, produced, reproduced, and diffused by civil society actors. Moreover, we intend this special issue to serve as a collection of templates or case studies of civil society involved, more or less successfully, in the reframing of food production, consumption, and distribution in our cities. The articles provide instructive analysis of the contextual and proximate factors that facilitate or constrain the emergence of UA from the ground up. They provide insight into specific strategies that can bring the project of productively greening our cities closer to fruition. We believe that social scientists, including scholar-activists, are well placed to interrogate the grassroots experiences of actors on the ground, and to mediate those experiences to relevant policy makers and stakeholders.

This collection is set against the backdrop of the current crisis-prone economic system, the management of which is a major task faced by the institutions of the central (and the local) state across Europe. In particular, the key challenges faced by Europe in the post-Fordist era have been identified by Enzo Mingione (1996, 1997, 2005) as industrial restructuring and the attendant intensification of competitiveness, the crisis of welfare and public services, and the reshaping of patterns of political representation and citizenship. To these challenges we should also add the implications of climate change and global warming for ecological sustainability and the consequences (some unintended) that flow from the intensification of technology use in everyday life. Taken together, these challenges are forcing a reworking of both the regulatory regime within which the state does its business and the form and functions of state practices, producing a more polarizing politics across the continent. Writing more than a decade ago, Mingione observed that Europe is set on a path toward social regimes that are centered on more unstable, fragmented, flexible, and nonstandardized rationales than in the past (2005: 67).



The adoption of a neoliberal agenda across Europe has been consequential. We have witnessed a greater emphasis on slimmed-down government; in some cases a diminution of the role and function of municipal authorities; a new concern with the third sector or civil society domain between state and market; and an emphasis on the idea of social capital as a crucial resource for local and regional growth. In particular, “the focus on the public sector dimension has been de-emphasised whereas the ‘societal’ and ‘voluntary’ side and the ‘market’ dimension of the local arena of the ‘community space’ has been re-accentuated and expanded” (Wollman 2004: 3–4). These trends have accelerated in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 and the austerity programs that followed in many European countries.

Against this backdrop, then, the structuring of urban governance in relation to an issue such as urban agriculture may be seen as the outcome of a particular balance struck between markets (logic of economic activity), hierarchies (the state), and networks (the logic of webs of social relations that can stretch across space and time) (Healey 2006: 300). Which of these three interrelated elements is in the ascendancy depends on the particular socioeconomic and historical context that prevails, and is specific to time and place. It is tempting to take a pessimistic view of the disintegration or fragmentation of traditional modes of governance dominated by the state. Provocatively, Patsy Healey poses the question of whether this change represents “a moment of opportunity for new governance modes, coalitions and agendas focused around a strong territorial sensibility able to generate new relations of integration so that a city or urban region can once again become a strong collective actor locally and in the European arena” (2006: 303). Focusing specifically on a food justice agenda in the contemporary city, Chiara Tornaghi (2016) argues for a politics of engagement, capability, and empowerment that extends citizens’ control over social reproduction. Specifically, she envisages an alternative urbanism based on a critique of neoliberalism, the embedding of agroecological principles in the urban realm, and urban food commoning. Although generally conceived of as temporary and contingent, the range and breadth of productive, pedagogic, and political activities engaged in by UA practitioners means that urban space is imbued with new meanings and values, which challenge the assumptions of neoliberal development policies. To some extent, the articles collected here identify important moments of opportunity that represent an “urban agriculture turn”—in cities and towns across Europe and beyond.



This collection helps to map the contours of the opportunity structure required for the emergence of innovative, experimental, practitioner-led, and civil society–driven ways of doing things. The field of urban agriculture proves to be highly adaptable and flexible, inclusive in orientation, and dynamic in terms of creating action on the ground. The breadth and extent of agricultural-related activities in and around Europe’s urban and periurban sectors is remarkable. UA could become an important conduit for a politics “from below” to push the notion of the sustainable city steadily up the urban, regional, and European policy agendas. Nevertheless, while UA has become much more visible across the urban landscape, and has been quite successful at capturing the media’s imagination, a question remains as to whether real and significant change is actually occurring. Despite the best efforts of civil society actors, there is limited evidence of political reframing around food justice, and even fewer instances of dynamic and innovative policy making in this sphere. Furthermore, in the absence of state resources in terms of access to land, funding, and knowledge exchange, the tasks of promoting and mainstreaming UA remain extremely challenging.

## The Articles

Charlotte Prové, Denise Kemper, and Salma Loudiyi recognize the high expectations that we place on civil society within the UA sector, and the absence of analytical tools for developing a comprehensive study of UA governance, policies, and practices. They seek to address this shortcoming through devising a conceptual framework that enables the categorization of urban agricultural initiatives in terms of a set of intragovernance characteristics, intergovernance characteristics, and wider contextual factors. Drawing on demonstration case studies, the authors are thus able to distill some of the key factors underpinning UA initiatives (which are highly relevant to other case studies discussed in the course of this issue). For instance, they note the public character and citizen focus of UA initiatives, while at the same time recording the instigators’ concerns about the exclusion of disadvantaged groups.

This article indicates that even in more economically orientated UA initiatives there is a strong commitment to participatory and horizontal decision making, a theme that resonates throughout all the contributions to the special issue. Access to land, funding, and knowledge are the most essential resources required by UA initiatives. Land in and around the city is heavily monetized, and even if in public ownership, the



pull of the market often obliterates the possibility of alternative usage. Nevertheless, a number of our contributors are able to demonstrate how realignments in the wider political environment (to some extent catalyzed by civil society mobilization) can force a compromise in which the use value supplants the exchange value of urban land tracts.

In terms of intergovernance characteristics, Prové and colleagues (and other contributors) identify the importance of partnerships involving civil society, the market, and the public sector to the success of urban agriculture initiatives, although the case studies presented indicate that the relative role of each partner is case-specific. Urban agriculture tends to be embedded within a broader urban context to which it must adapt. The intersectionality of UA and its plurality of functions enables locally conceived and implemented projects to resonate among a wider constituency within the urban area, although the support received from stakeholders tends to be informal, voluntary, and fragmented. Finally, Prové and colleagues draw our attention to the core features that all the UA initiatives they studied share: a generalized uncertainty about tenure and continuity, the ability to be flexible in adapting to a rapidly changing urban context, and the significance of change agents as driving forces.

The next three articles focus on the specificities of three contrasting case studies of UA initiatives largely driven by goal-oriented civil society actors operating in variable local contexts. It is a truism that economic crisis can act as a catalyst for new forms of community-based cooperation in urban agriculture. We normally associate such activity with the global South, with the exception of famous and highly mediatised examples such as the case of Detroit in the United States. Marian Simon-Rojo, Inés Morales-Bernardos, and Jon Sanz-Landaluze demonstrate how a confluence of circumstances in a global city of the North—Madrid—created the conditions in which a food sovereignty movement could move relatively speedily from protest to the coproduction of public policy. The authors argue that a grassroots movement responding to the impact of austerity and embodying agroecology and food sovereignty principles (adapted from similar initiatives in the global South) set out to transform Madrid's urban food regime. Crucially, the election of civil society activists to city councils in 2015 has brought about a shift in the political opportunity structure, opening the way for change agents to push forward a more radical urban agriculture and food justice agenda. It remains to be seen whether an insurgent movement of this nature can successfully navigate the institutional regime to bring about long-term, sustainable change.



The field of contestation is more complex in the case study from Istanbul presented by Alice Genoud, who charts the controversy over the redevelopment of a heritage *bostan* in the neighborhood of Kuzguncuk. Different sectors of civil society (gentrifiers, old-timers, and environmentalists) held competing visions of land usage and the greening of the city that ultimately proved incompatible, forcing a compromise in the short term with the municipality. She links the decline in urban agricultural spaces in the city to a process of urban development on the one hand and the creation of public parks (as part of civic and nationalist boosterism) on the other. Urban vegetable gardens were mainly the preserve of the poorer sections of the Turkish population, whereas the emergent and increasingly vocal middle class sought access to recreational parks. Local inhabitants mobilized to retain the *bostan* as an open green and social area, whereas the centralized urban regime wanted to use this land for a profitable building project, without consultation with the neighborhood. The catalytic event for the mobilization was the Gezi movement that had begun in the city in 2013, and diffused countrywide thereafter. Taking a micropower perspective inspired by an urban political ecology framework, Genoud analyzes the social tensions present around urban gardens in cities that are subject to urban pressure and where each plot of land can be a potential constructed area. Her case study shows the problems with integrating the interests of different class groupings in the face of a neoliberal landowner with a political agenda ultimately at odds with the local citizenry.

Giulia Giacchè and Lya Porto seek to locate the place of a specific urban agriculture initiative, Incredible Edible (IE), within the broader category of urban agriculture. Founded in 2008 in Todmorden (UK), IE is a community benefit society committed to growing produce locally to share with all. Relying fully on volunteers, it operates without any paid staff, buildings, or funding from statutory organizations. Income is generated from voluntary donations and fees charged for talks and tours. IE, on the one hand, embodies the collectivist principle of traditional community gardening, but on the other hand, it has aspirations toward radical activism (more congruent with guerrilla gardening). The authors set out to evaluate the mechanisms of diffusion of the IE model in two different urban contexts. They demonstrate that both the local contexts (in Rennes, France, and Montreal, Canada) and mechanisms of diffusion influence the modality of local implementation. Their case studies suggest the potential of a small-scale, locally grounded movement to capture the imagination and develop a global reach largely through social



media. At the same time, there are significant challenges in diffusing a model of urban agriculture more broadly while retaining fidelity to its core principles. In practice, there is a lack of clarity about the objectives of the IE model. The tension between its community/activist orientations results in fragmentation and diversity in its wider implementation.

The next two articles offer a lens on the production of food in the city from contrasting perspectives. The first article takes a systems approach to food, noting its virtual absence within urban policy systems. The second article focuses on the spatialization of allotment gardening in the contemporary European city. Heidrun Moschitz, Jan Landert, Christian Schader, and Rebekka Frick offer an informative analysis of the urban food system of the Swiss city of Basel. Their purpose is to explore and promote a conceptual and policy framework within which a more environmentally sustainable, integrated, civic-minded food system can be conceived and developed. The authors suggest that we try to understand the potential of UA by considering its role in the overarching food system. They note the “invisibility” of food in the city government and the absence of a comprehensive food strategy. They identify three strategies to enable the city to transition toward a more sustainable food system: increasing social and environmental standards of public procurement, strengthening the local economy by promoting short food supply chains, and raising awareness about food production and consumption through education. The latter, in particular, is of relevance for civil society.

Esther J. Veen and Sebastian Eiter focus on urban allotments in the Netherlands and Norway, arguing that access to an allotment and the opportunity to grow and harvest vegetables is of more importance to gardeners in disadvantaged neighborhoods, both in terms of the enhancement of diet and of social cohesion. In particular, immigrants who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods have fewer possibilities for social encounters in their daily lives. Thus, the practice of gardening has a role to play in combatting social exclusion. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge that the spatial segregation of the neighborhood is mirrored in the different socioeconomic profiles of gardeners on allotment sites. Cities that are sharply segregated will offer fewer opportunities for chance encounters between different ethnoracial and class groups. Moreover, social distance manifests itself on sites that have a mixed group of gardeners, with different groups tending to “keep to their own.” Veen and Eiter conclude that, while the allotment garden can ameliorate social differences through inculcating a tolerance of diversity, it can also manifest exclusionary dynamics that serve to replicate

the broader race and class-based disparities that exist in the wider social system (Reynolds 2015).

Finally, the contribution of Attila Tóth, Barbora Duží, Jan Vávra, Ján Supuka, Mária Bihuňová, Denisa Halajová, Stanislav Martinát, and Eva Nováková extends the current debates on European urban gardening by providing an in-depth account of the development of UA in two societies that tend to be on the periphery of this research despite their historically strong allotment culture. The authors demonstrate the value of taking a longer historical view, showing how the relative roles of state, market, and civil society have shifted across time in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Allotment gardening was deeply embedded in civil society throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, but in the postwar period urban agriculture was brought under the remit of centralized state planning, with the imposition of top-down organizational structures and rules. Nevertheless, the intention of the regime was to protect and support the practice of allotment gardening. Moreover, from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s the commitment to collective land ownership ensured that agricultural development was included in local master plans. The replacement of a centrally planned economy with a market economy following the fall of the communist regime resulted in much more precarious access to land for allotment gardeners. This, coupled with a breakdown in the planning system, the rapid development of a real estate market, and a new consumerism, resulted in a dramatic decline in urban agriculture. More recently, however, there is evidence of convergence with the pattern identified in other countries of the North: shrinking availability of land for cultivation in and around Czech and Slovak cities on the one hand, and a growing public engagement emerging from civil society on the other.

## Key Themes

In this section, we identify a number of crosscutting themes that emerge from the research conducted on the relationship between urban agriculture and civil society more generally, and what we have learned from our involvement with a multidisciplinary network of scholars<sup>11</sup> seeking to illuminate UA governance and policy parameters in particular. Our focus is fourfold: the empowerment of the citizen, the impact of crisis, the use and function of public spaces, and the dual role of scholar-activist. We raise a number of questions that warrant further research.





## ***The Empowerment of Citizens***

Urban agricultural initiatives represent forms of empowerment for civil society: improving the quality of neighborhoods, implementing fairer working conditions, making local, fresh, sustainably produced food affordable to the most vulnerable. In a critical literature, this empowerment is presented as a means of liberation from the sphere colonized by neoliberal relations (Tornaghi 2016), even if there is a risk of instrumentalization by the neoliberal project (McClintock 2014; Tornaghi 2014). As such, some urban agriculture initiatives constitute an alternative to the dominant economic system. Such initiatives often evolve in the context of a failure of existing public policies. In the context of Madrid in Spain, a city buffeted by the economic crisis and property crash of 2008, Simon-Rojo and colleagues trace the emergence of a quartet of food movements as a response to crisis-induced social disempowerment and deprivation. Crucially, these movements, while differing in terms of their objectives, strategies, and lines of action, unified around the notion of an alternative food network. The movement formed part of a more broad-based political platform seeking to challenge the dominant paradigm of urban development. This bottom-up political mobilization contributed to regime change in the city in 2015 and the distinct possibility of a renegotiation of the city's food policy regime.

In the case of the preservation of the *bostan* in Istanbul, Genoud equally focuses on the significance of grassroots mobilization in attempting to influence the urban regime. The outcome, however, in this context is less clear-cut. Genoud analyzes how conflicting views of different urban constituencies intersect with political positions and societal representations. There is a palpable sense that while a compromise was brokered to retain the green space in the neighborhood, the configuration of that green space has much less to do with the cultural heritage of the *bostan* and more to do with the imperatives of urban theme parking (Gottdeiner 2001). We believe there is scope for developing further research on how popular resistant movements can influence public policy making. In particular, how do newly emerged civil society initiatives manage to bring about their objectives for social and economic changes? In what ways and to what extent can grassroots initiatives “unblock” the political system so that the latter becomes more open to change? What kinds of blocks in the system in particular militate against such change? A number of our contributors have identified the contrast between the highly networked activities of civil society actors and the rigidly segmented urban policy regime.

This suggests a weak articulation between top-down initiatives (public policies/strategies) and the bottom-up approaches (civil society). How might the interactions between state and civil society be rearticulated in a more fruitful way? Finally, there remains a tension between the need for better state resourcing (a common theme across this collection), which has to be set against the potential of co-optation, an issue that is intimated in the articles by Simon-Rojo and colleagues and Genoud. We therefore raise the question of whether UA should remain radically on the margins, or move to the mainstream. As a corollary, should UA seek incorporation into the political system, or should it maintain its position on the political edge?

### ***The Impact of Crisis***

Urban agriculture is historically and traditionally associated with times of economic crisis. In the global South, UA represents a necessary activity for poor people in the cities (Smit et al. 1996). Indeed, “poverty has become an increasingly urban phenomenon at the end of the 20th century. The first concern of the urban poor is food security, and through their resourcefulness, they have reinvented agriculture to fit the new post-industrial city” (Smit et al. 2001: 4). In the North, the importance of urban gardening production massively increased, especially in times of food shortage during economic crises or periods of war, when so-called war gardens or emergency gardens were established (Lawson 2004). We are currently noting a great resurgence of initiatives in the cities of the North that are obviously linked with austerity: agricultural practices in the shrinking city of Detroit is the archetypal illustration (Mogk et al. 2010). Louiza Boukharaeva and Marcel Marloie (2011) highlight the significant contribution of urban gardening in Russia to national agricultural production, and present these gardens as buffers for economic crisis. Poverty is not only a question of food shortage but also of food quality. Urban agriculture holds out the prospect of access to locally produced, fresh vegetables.

The recent economic crisis has had real consequences for Europeans in terms of their access to work, welfare, and the means necessary to secure life chances. One way in which people have responded to the crisis is in the renewal of interest in self-provisioning through urban agriculture initiatives. There is little doubt that the post-2007 crisis of capitalism has brought into sharp relief a trend toward UA in developed countries, and we collected many case studies of these within our COST working group. We suggest that economic retrenchment coupled



with a desire for a greater sense of ontological security in an increasingly uncertain world underpin this trend. As Nathan McClintock has observed, “the popularity of UA in the global North has surged and the discourse surrounding it has shifted from one of recreation and leisure to one of urban sustainability and economic resilience” (2010: 1). This theme is evident in the contributions to this volume by Simon-Rojo and colleagues, Veen and Eiter, as well as Giacchè and Porto.

There is, however, an inherent tension in many urban agriculture initiatives. On the one hand, becoming actively involved in civil society campaigns and activities can contribute toward developing solidarity and resilience in the face of the structural changes in the wider urban economy. On the other hand, reliance on volunteer activity (such as is the case with Incredible Edible and many other civil society organizations committed to food justice and sustainability) places an additional burden on activists and may fail to reach those who are suffering multiple deprivations. The “do it yourself” ethos that underpins much civil society activity ironically may have the effect of underplaying collective political responses, and unintentionally contributing to “austerity urbanism” (Peck 2012). To what extent, then, can we argue that urban agricultural initiatives in civil society are tools of urban resilience? If so, what kinds of production, outreach, skills acquisition, and supporting infrastructure can help develop resilience in the face of economic crisis? More worryingly, what are the implications of civil society initiatives serving simply as counterpoints to public measures of austerity such as cuts in municipal budgets?

### ***The Use and Function of Public Spaces***

Land or space is likely the most important resource for the sustenance of urban agriculture initiatives, as Prové and colleagues demonstrate in this issue. Should urban dwellers have a right to places to cultivate in the city? Should the municipality be required to cede land for cultivation to civil society groups?

UA initiatives are taking place mostly in public spaces, sometimes replacing other uses. Allotments and community gardens are in many cases planned for by city government, but there are also instances of nonlegal framed occupation. Urban agriculture initiatives often lack formal approval from authorities, or require very temporary permissions at best (e.g., use of vacant land, short-term leases). The question of the use of collective gardens in their multiplicity of forms and concepts (relief gardens, war gardens, and victory gardens in particular) as an

urban planning tool in the course of the twentieth century in the United States was dealt with by Laura Lawson (2004). She highlights a key ambiguity: these gardens, while successively mobilized throughout the twentieth century to respond to multiple social problems, are never perpetuated. Rather, they always appear as ephemeral intervention tools. Their sustainability and durability is therefore always in question.

Current publications, propositions, and theories regarding UA poorly address the question of the productive use of public spaces. In current literature, notably regarding food justice (Tornaghi 2016 and others), open spaces in the city seem often considered as underused spaces available for culture. What about the other potential functions (leisure, ornamental, aesthetic) of public spaces? What is the balance between urban renewal projects and productive landscapes in a context where a main regional urban objective is to keep periurban farmlands from being overrun by urban sprawl (Ernwein and Salomon Cavin 2014)? From a research point of view, it would be useful to explore more deeply the role and function of urban agriculture within the wider public realm, particularly in the context of cities where there are significant contestations between different urban constituencies around the use of public space (Genoud, this issue; Tóth et al., this issue; Corcoran and Kettle 2015).

### ***Scholar Activism***

Urban agriculture is an ambiguous and complex field for research because it appears as a place of decompartmentalization between different disciplines and also between the reflexive and practical spheres. In the COST project, the working groups were composed of panels of disciplines from agronomists to landscape planners, and with a mix of academicians and practitioners. Obviously, UA has great potential regarding multidisciplinary and research-practice relations. There is no obvious limit to reflection and action: they are interrelated and sustain each other. UA thus comes very close to the definition of agroecology as “a transdisciplinary, participatory, and action-oriented approach” (Méndez et al. 2013: 3).

This permeability has clear consequences for research practices. The topic of urban agriculture, especially, but not only, in the anglophone literature, is linked with an activist stance close to the position or tradition of political ecology and radical geography (e.g., Harvey 1972). Several members of the European COST project were representative of this trend. Designating themselves as scholar-activists, they advocate



for the implementation of urban agriculture within cities in ways that contribute to urban food justice, liberating people from the neoliberal urban condition (Tornaghi 2016). Unsurprisingly, some authors of the articles presented in this special issue are actively involved in the UA initiatives they are analyzing. For instance, Simon-Rojo and colleagues present themselves as researchers and activists involved in several agro-ecologist movements in Madrid and across Europe.

Urban agriculture appears as a salient topic to explore researchers' positions and relationships with their field of inquiry. It raises interesting questions linked to objectivity and subjectivity in the sciences (notably Latour and Woolgar [1979] 1986). How do you navigate a militancy milieu from a research standpoint when you are yourself involved in the activities? At what point does it stop being research and become only advocacy? We can certainly concede that research and advocacy can go hand in hand as long as the researcher is mindful and explicit about his/her values. Subjectivity, self-values, activism, especially in the case of urban agriculture, can be seen as a dynamic engine for research. Our point is that between systematic "cold/pure deconstruction" on the part of the scholar on the one hand and "blind legitimation/validation" on the part of the activist on the other, there is an alternative position of constructive criticism. We suggest that it is important that early career researchers in urban agriculture who are also activists be sensitized to these issues. In terms of a broader research agenda, the role and the importance of scholar activism in the emergence of urban initiatives in Europe is an interesting question to focus on.

## Concluding Comments

Promoting the well-being of its citizens is a primary objective of the European Union (Art. 3, no. 1 of the Lisbon Treaty), but how we define well-being has to be linked to wider social, political, and environmental contexts of sustainability. In practice, most cross-national comparisons have been based almost exclusively on economic variables. Since the publication of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission Report (Stiglitz and Sen 2009), there has been a new focus on generating more sensitive measures for gauging human progress. The goals of promoting urban sustainability operationalized through fostering social cohesion and minimizing social polarization are predicated on enhancing the capacity of people to participate fully in the life of their society, and this is central to quality of life. Socioeconomic security and a sense of empowerment



and personal capacity foment collective social capital and enhance the collective lifeworld. Parra and Moolaert (2012) advocate a perspective in which “the social” is primarily seen as a sociopolitical process that dialogically reveals the essential multipartner and multiscale nature of sustainable development and its governance process.

Pathways to urban sustainability, especially articulated at policy level, are frequently aspirational, with little practical guidance on substantive content or guides to strategic implementation. On the one hand, adapting a comparative approach enables us to document and aggregate the rich, textured, and sometimes contradictory nature of urban agricultural initiatives across Europe from the ground up. On the other hand, a comparative approach presents awkward challenges: How do we embrace the complexity and diversity of UA? How do we integrate multiple readings of landscape by different academic constituencies, researchers, and practitioners? How do we make this work relevant to policy?

Karin Bradley (2009) suggests that we need to adapt urban sustainability policies to the growing diversity of urban populations, as well as develop more skepticism about the prevalent discourse on sustainability that especially reflects middle-class values. Social scientists are well placed to interrogate the grassroots experiences of actors on the ground, and to mediate those experiences to relevant policy makers. We can ask difficult questions and illuminate the factors that promote or limit UA’s potential, particularly in relation to social inclusion, citizen empowerment, and systems transformation. By focusing on the real practices taking place in the civil society sector, such as those outlined in this special issue, social scientists can make the connections between sustainability goals (articulated from above) and the lifeworld of real European citizens (articulated from below) who, through practices such as urban agriculture in all its myriad manifestations, are contributing to urban sustainability.

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## Note

1. COST ACTION TD1106 Urban Agriculture Europe Working Group Two: Governance Models and Policy Contexts.

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