The ongoing exodus of rural people to urban areas in developing countries has led to rapid and massive increases in the urban population. Often rural emigration results in the transfer of poverty, hunger and malnutrition from the countryside to towns and cities, a process known as the “urbanization of poverty”.

To meet their food needs and to supplement their incomes, many urban inhabitants—especially those newly arrived from the countryside—practise urban and peri-urban horticulture (UPH) on vacant lots, in backyards, along rivers, roads and railways, and under power lines.

Governments and city administrations need to recognize the opportunities offered by UPH to improve urban food security and livelihoods. By adopting policy responses that better integrate horticulture into urban development, developing countries can reap considerable benefits, especially enhancements in social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Vulnerability of the urban poor
The urban poor often have fewer informal safety nets, such as kinship and community networks. They depend mainly on purchased food, which may account for as much as 70% of their incomes. This dependence is compounded by their lack of access to natural resources, principally land and water, which would allow them to grow food.

The urban poor are highly vulnerable to crises, which can take a variety of shapes and forms. For example, because they spend a large share of their disposable income on food, the urban poor were particularly hard hit by the upsurge in food prices in 2007-08. The urban poor also suffered disproportionately in the 2009 global economic downturn, which reduced their employment and income opportunities.

Growing importance of UPH
Urban and peri-urban horticulture can increase the resilience of the urban poor to external shocks by buffering the adverse food security and income effects of crises and economic upheaval. More generally, UPH contributes to food security,
nutrition and livelihoods in a combination of ways:
- by providing for self-consumption, it can contribute to healthy diets while reducing household food expenditures
- it provides a source of income generation, through the sale of surpluses
- it provides local markets with an immediate supply of fresh and micronutrient-rich foodstuffs at competitive prices

While detailed data on UPH are scarce, it has been estimated that some 200 million people are engaged in urban agriculture and related enterprises, contributing to the food supply of 800 million urban dwellers. In Africa, 40% of urban dwellers are said to be involved in some form of agricultural activity and this figure rises to 50% in Latin American countries.

FAO recently investigated the importance and prevalence of urban agriculture and its impact on household food security in a sample of 15 developing and formally transitional countries. Findings indicate that horticulture is a significant activity in the urban economy, involving as much as 65% of urban households.

UPH production is generally geared towards consumption within the household. In many countries more than half of the poorest urban households depend on horticulture to help satisfy their food needs. UPH also had a significant role in generating incomes. For example, in Bangladesh, Madagascar and Nepal, more than a third of production is sold to markets. For the poorest urban dwellers—notably in Madagascar and Nigeria—the share of income derived from UPH exceeds 50%. With very few exceptions, poor urban dwellers are more likely to participate in UPH than higher income households.

The study also highlighted that urban agriculture, especially horticulture, is associated with greater dietary diversity and calorie availability, with fruits and vegetables contributing the most towards improved food security. Urban households engaged in horticultural activities tend to consume greater quantities of food—sometimes as much as 30% more.

Fulfilling the potential
In the past, governments have cast aside important opportunities by banning farming activities in cities. That is no longer an option. Policy makers are encouraged to actively promote UPH by identifying ways to integrate horticultural activities and related enterprise in urban land-use planning—for example, by providing technical guidance on good production techniques and by improving the functioning of urban food markets.

UPH is already an important reality in many developing countries. In the decades ahead, its contribution to urban food security, economic development and employment could be even more significant. Equipping urban vegetable growers with better know-how and creating an enabling environment for them are necessary steps towards fully realizing that potential.

Further reading
Growing greener cities (FAO, Rome, 2010)
Profitability and sustainability of urban and peri-urban agriculture (FAO, Rome, 2007)

In Africa, 40% of urban dwellers are said to be involved in some form of agricultural activity

Guidelines for policy makers
An FAO study, Profitability and sustainability of urban and peri-urban agriculture (2007), provides guidelines for policymakers on measures that promote a thriving and sustainable UPH sector. They include:
- Integrate UPH into urban planning and policymaking
- Review existing policies and by-laws on UPH in order to identify and remove unnecessary legal restrictions
- Facilitate access for urban farmers to available urban open spaces
- Enhance the productivity and economic viability of UPH by improving access to training, technical advice, services and credit
- Support the establishment and strengthening of growers’ organizations
- Facilitate market-oriented, entrepreneurial and enterprise-driven urban horticulture

Urban participation in agricultural activities (% of population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
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<th>Activities</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Panama</td>
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</table>

Source: Zezza, A. and L. Tasciotti, in Food policy, Vol. 35(4)

Further reading
Growing greener cities (FAO, Rome, 2010)
Profitability and sustainability of urban and peri-urban agriculture (FAO, Rome, 2007)

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