Urban and peri-urban horticulture

UPH and the urban food supply

Awareness is growing of the need for local and city authorities to play a proactive and coordinating role in improving urban food security

Key points

As urbanization accelerates, the overall cost of supplying, distributing and accessing food is likely to increase while food quality and safety may deteriorate.

Urban and peri-urban horticulture (UPH) can be an important source of food for cities. But city authorities should help minimize adverse health and environmental consequences and adopt regulations that facilitate its activities.

Investments are needed in market, storage and transport infrastructure in order to facilitate the movement in space and time of food products at reasonable cost.

The traditional food retail sector is central to improving urban food distribution in cities in developing countries.

Urban residents depend on markets for almost all of their food purchases. Urban population growth, rising levels of urban poverty and issues affecting food supply and distribution, to and within cities, have four major consequences for urban food security.

• Demand for land needed for housing, industry and infrastructure reduces the availability of agriculturally productive lands.
• Increasing quantities of food must be brought into expanding urban areas, and distributed—meaning more trucks, traffic congestion, noise, air pollution and stress on existing markets.
• Growing demand for convenience and processed meals raises issues of food quality and safety.
• As low-income households reside farther away from food markets, they face higher prices, time constraints and transport costs in accessing food.

As urban expansion accelerates, the overall cost of supplying, distributing and accessing food—and, with it, the number of food insecure households—is likely to increase. The challenge is to facilitate consumer access to food and ensure that investments are made in increasing food production, processing and distribution capacities and services under hygienic, healthy and environmentally sound conditions.

Food supply issues

Urban and peri-urban horticulture (UPH) can be an important source of food for cities, especially when rural food production and transportation systems are underdeveloped. However, agriculture near densely populated areas poses a number of problems. Inappropriate use of chemicals and solid and liquid wastes can contaminate food, soil and water. While many problems could be solved by information and extension advice, city authorities have often responded by destroying food crops and evicting food producers from public lands.

Why urban food costs more

The cost of feeding cities is expected to increase due to transportation costs, which can reach as high as 90 percent of the overall food marketing margin. Other negative factors are post-harvest food losses caused by inappropriate handling and packaging (as high as 35% for perishable food products), the need to collect food from a large number of small farmers, delays caused by checkpoints and taxation, and traffic jams in cities and around markets.
Food distribution issues
Many wholesale markets are surrounded by high-density urban development, with little or no space available for expansion. Cold storage is often insufficient. These difficulties create additional costs for traders and increase food contamination risks.

In developing countries, the traditional market sector is central to improving urban food distribution. However, public retail markets are often congested, unhealthy and insecure. Spontaneous markets are often discouraged by local authorities. Many cities have seen steep growth in informal-sector retailing, which fits an important gap in the distribution chain. Informal food activities also serve as an important source of revenue for many low-income households.

The role of city and local authorities
Awareness is growing of the need for local and city authorities to play a pro-active and coordinating role in improving urban food security. They should consider four strategic principles:

- adopt an approach that is participatory, alliance-seeking and involves the private sector
- promote competition and reduce the influence of large intermediaries
- leave to the private sector facilities and services that can best be run as businesses
- encourage development that lowers the cost of living and stimulates employment

City and local authorities can play a crucial role in national food security policies by soliciting government support for projects and programmes that reduce local constraints affecting food supply chain development.

They should also support urban and peri-urban horticulture with information campaigns and technical guidance in order to minimize adverse health and environmental consequences, and adopt regulations that facilitate UPH activities.

City and local authorities can also help ensure that food distribution issues are appropriately considered when new infrastructure, facilities and services are being planned.

Further information
For a full list of publications and multi-media products on urban food supply and distribution, write to: Olivio.Argenti@fao.org

Locally grown produce is fresher – and costs less
As cities grow, valuable agricultural land is lost to housing, industries and infrastructure. Result: production of fresh food is being pushed further into rural areas. The cost of transport, packing and refrigeration, the poor state of rural roads, and heavy losses in transit add to the scarcity and cost of fruit and vegetables in urban markets.

Today, more than half of Beijing’s vegetable supply comes from the city’s own market gardens, and it costs less than produce trucked from more distant areas. Horticulture in and around Hanoi produces more than 150 000 tonnes of fruit and vegetables a year. In Cuba, which has promoted intensive UPH since the early 1990s, the sector accounts for 60 percent of horticultural production.

UPH has environmental benefits. It reduces the need to transport produce into cities from distant rural areas, generating fuel savings, fewer carbon dioxide emissions and less air pollution. It lowers city temperatures and, when practised on greenbelts, improves landscapes and citizens’ quality of life.

from Growing greener cities (FAO, 2010)