

Urban Agriculture and Food Security: Africa - Toronto Exchange

Workshop Report June 22nd, 2010



Background:

The Urban Food Security: Africa-Toronto exchange took place in Toronto between the 14th and 23rd of June. The learning exchange involved one visitor from Mazingira Institute in Nairobi, Kenya, one visitor from Communicare, and one visitor from the City of Cape Town, both from Cape town, South Africa. The group visited and met with many organizations and programs on urban agriculture in the city of Toronto. They looked at practices and challenges around such issues as: growing and extension services, technology, land use planning, public health and community mobilization in the context of housing, urban development and food security.

This workshop was intended to wrap up nine days of visits. It brought together many of the organizations involved in the visit and was intended to:

- Consolidate learning and observations.
- Examine aspects that can be built on in the future
- Explore potential partnerships and collaborations

This brief report captures some of the discussion and highlights some of the ways forward.

Introduction:

Steve Floros, Acting Chief Operating Officer of Toronto Community Housing (TCH), welcomed participants to the workshop. TCH is actively interested in promoting community gardens as part of their tenant engagement strategy and community safety initiatives.

Barry Pinsky, Executive Director of Rooftops Canada, introduced the context of Rooftops Canada's involvement with urban agriculture and food security issues. Rooftops Canada works with housing organizations and groups in Southern and Eastern Africa to improve housing conditions and build sustainable communities. Several of these groups are engaged in food security issues particularly within the context of HIV and AIDS.

This was followed by a panel presentation chaired by: Barbara Emanuel from Toronto Public Health and two speakers: Kuria Gathuru speaking on behalf of the visitors and Ravenna Barker from FoodShare.

Barbara Emanuel provided an overview of the development of urban food strategy in Toronto and the importance of food in building collaborations and partnerships. She shared these ideas:

- The latest Toronto food strategy, "cultivating food connections", is a testament to the power of food to bring people together and build partnerships
- Food is a powerful tool for building communities/cities and addressing barriers - "we are able to open our hearts, minds, doors around food"
- Battles are very similar across Canada and Africa with similar barriers and systems to negotiate, eg. livestock, land use issues.
- Look for ways to move agendas forward by involving multiple stakeholders and balancing different interests

Kuria Gathuru presented the visitors observations and lessons, including the following points:

- In Africa, the challenge is to get food to people, in Canada the focus is on organic food
- The urban food community in Toronto is well networked with stakeholder engagement at all levels and high levels of voluntarism
- The community is engaged at all levels around food including children, youth, seniors

- Importance of the concept of “food justice” linked to social inclusion
- Funding opportunities exist for sustained activities
- Need to encourage and involve younger generations
- Issues are similar but there are lots of solutions, one of the key things is to get people excited
- Urban agriculture policy responds to various needs related to economic and community development
- Lack of space for livestock is another common issue
- Sustained funding for projects is needed in Africa

Ravenna Barker, Community Food Manager at Foodshare, discussed the opportunities provided by such an exchange to share ideas and learn from one another’s experiences. She emphasized the ability of food to break silos while recognizing that further communication is still needed in Toronto to break down barriers and bring more stakeholders to the table. She noted that in NEFSALF, Nairobi the consultation process around urban food is an inspiring process because it includes many levels of actors and is ongoing. Some of the other key points she raised included:

- Using animators to reach out to vulnerable communities
- Recognizing that policy alone is not enough for food security and must be teamed with grassroots action
- The need for popular support of people who are growing
- The threat of expanding cities swallowing up farmland

Discussion and key ideas:

The group discussed lessons learned from the exchange visit. The following themes came out of the discussion:

Food is a connector - cuts across political boundaries/cultural boundaries/silos.

Food is a key tool for mobilizing people - connects with various issues from a human rights and security approach.

Food justice - social inclusion, distribution of food, youth engagement in production, encouraging childrens’ learning, open sharing of experiences, free flow of information.

Food as a learning space- to build a space of trust and relationships for substantial engagement on all levels - grassroots to policy.

Animators - use food to build a community, ‘breathe life into communities where there was none before’ often based on building a framework of trust

- An example was Toronto’s Food and Hunger Action Committee which used animators to bring the most marginalized communities into food justice programs

Participants then divided into two groups to discuss key success factors and barriers to effective programs and policy and to focus on the way forward. The first group discussed community and youth engagement in the context of food security. The second group discussed creating an enabling policy environment for urban agriculture.

Group 1: Community and youth engagement in the context of food

How do we engage youth in community mobilization and food security initiatives? What are some of the challenges faced and key factors for success?

- Engaging young people:
 - Income earning is a critical incentive for youth in Africa
 - Giving youth outcomes/goals not tasks

- Peer to peer learning
- Youth must have a voice in project direction and governance structures that allow them to have leadership roles
- Food and gardening can be the theatrical background for exploring their interests
- Young people need family support in their garden work to reduce conflict in other parts of life
- Mentors needed to provide direction and connections to champion their cause
- Youth who are heads of household are more interested than others, often driven by immediate family needs
- In slums and informal settlements, small gardens are used to bring back semblance of 'normal' life
- How do we engage more young women?
- How do we continue to engage youth as mentors?
- Gardening as a means of engagement - "food is a gateway"
- Responsibility as adults to expose youth to possibilities
- Using gardening and food to reach youth initially and then as a basis for providing other opportunities and incorporating other skills/interests
- Provide youth with challenges and leadership, giving them more than just tasks
- Making connections with other community and social programs
 - Let youth explore the variety of issues involved in gardening

Future directions:

Youth exchanges offer the potential for connections/networking/sharing ideas

- South-south exchanges may provide more realistic possibilities, often come from similar socio-political situations
- Collaborative projects and workshops involving visiting youth from Canada
- Introduce food animators into communities
- Look to organizations with successful learning structures for youth, such as Canada World Youth

Group 2: Urban Agriculture Policy

How do we engage stakeholders 'bring them into the tent together' around food policy issues and urban food security?

- Bringing people 'into the tent' around food safety and advocacy, for example Mazingira's work in Uganda involves face-to-face contact to build trust and learn from each other
- The importance of academic research linked to urban food security, especially evaluating policy and decision making work
- Building political support for urban agriculture, generating a network of stakeholders
- Involve all stakeholders in the development and consultation process
- Storytelling can be used to resolve issues
- Overseas visits can be a catalyst to springboard programs
- Use other peoples' experiences to help you move forward, for example involving Kenyan/South African Youth in the project in Botswana

Future directions:

- Formal partnerships - request TPH to collaborate around idea of reducing health inequalities via urban food security - TFPC, TEO

- See what various players can bring to the table
- Offer a short course in urban food security for municipal authorities involved in decision making, possibly with tendency in Toronto, Nairobi, Cape Town - assignments based on real things on the ground
- Create practices on the ground and use programs to address HIV/AIDS issues
- There is a huge amount of information that is not well organized: assess what information is available or not and where the gaps are
- Need to address the challenge of competing land uses

Closing Remarks and the Next Steps:

Barry Pinsky thanked TCH for hosting the workshop and everyone for their time and contributions. He summarized key ideas that were generated during the workshop around food security, youth engagement, and economic development. It will be important to continue to look for opportunities to integrate urban food security into Rooftops Canada's community and economic development training. Through the workshop and exchange visit several potential collaborations and partnerships have emerged between Rooftops Canada's African partners and Toronto food-based organizations.

The next steps will be to strengthen these partnerships by supporting continued communication and sharing of experiences. A proposed workshop in Nairobi will explore some of these ideas further. The possibilities that have emerged from the exchange visit are very exciting and will inform the way forward for Rooftops Canada and its partners' involvement with the development of urban food security programs.

Participants:

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