

Building prefigurations of an agroecological urbanism: the case of public farmland in Ghent (Belgium)

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The development of local food policies in Flanders has shed light on the possible strategic value of public farmland. This contrasts sharply with the large-scale sale of public agricultural land by local authorities that has been ongoing at the same time. This contradiction brings local authorities in an awkward position and continues to undermine the possibility to discuss the strategic use of public farmland in urban food policy. The result is a very trivial and sometimes counterproductive spatial food policy, which contributes to the continuation of food-disabling urbanisation processes. In Flanders, this debate has so far been conducted without an overview of the land owned by different public institutions. Using Belgian Land Registry data, we produced this missing cartography. It allows to explore and question some of the issues and contradictions in the current discourse on urban food policy. For this, we focus on the award-winning food policy of the city of Ghent, and we adopt a politicising agroecological farmers perspective. The research not only exposes a number of contradictions in current local food policy, but also highlights an untouched value for initiating an agroecological urbanism and bridging the deep rift between urban and rural worlds.

Keywords - public farmland, urban food policy, food-disabling city, agroecological urbanism, political agroecology

INTRODUCTION

A disproportionate focus on the market value of public land in neoliberal urban policymaking has prompted local governments in Flanders to sell off their public farmland (Vandermaelen, Beeckaert, Hiergens, & Deruytter, 2020). This policy is not only contributing to a structural shift from agricultural to non-agricultural use of farmland (see for example Verhoeve, Jacob, Vanempten, & De Waegemaeker, 2018), but also reinforces in many respects the continuation of urbanisation processes that actively undermine sustainable food production. The parallel emergence of local food policy, for which public farmland might be an interesting lever, creates a growing contradiction within urban policy. This unresolved conflict seriously impacts on the spatial dimensions of current urban food policy in several cities in Flanders. A missing spatial focus combined with a total absence of a cartography of public land

positions and overview of the land policies of various public institutions reinforces this trend, and obscures an essential debate.

While we believe that public farmland has a significant strategic value for shaping a proactive urban food policy, it is obvious that limited amounts of public farmland can never be a comprehensive answer to all agricultural challenges. However, our interest in the topic of public farmland goes beyond its direct use value on the ground. Based on action research in both the agroecological community and the urban policy arena, it is clear that the topic of public farmland captures the imagination of both communities, making it a valuable subject for a conversation across the urban-rural divide. The setup of such conversations is a crucial ingredient towards the prefiguration of what Tornaghi and Dehaene call an agroecological urbanism: a post-capitalist, non-extractive urbanism that has food production, ecological stewardship and social justice at its core (Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2019, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

Working with data from the Belgian Land Registry, we were able to construct a comprehensive map of public land ownership in Flanders and Brussels, including both an overview of the most recent situation (1/1/2020) and an overview of the evolution of public land ownership during the past 10 years (2010-2020). In the analysis, we focus on the city region of Ghent, a city that is internationally celebrated for its food policy 'Gent en Garde'. Excursions to other cities in Flanders and to Brussels will be used to place the Ghent case in context. After a general cartographic analysis of this material, we use the map to contribute to ongoing discussions and issues in the urban food policy discourse in Flanders. These issues are identified on the basis of three years of action research, through participatory observation in a Flemish training centre for biodynamic agriculture⁵, in-depth interviews with agroecological farmers, and activism in the city of Ghent⁶. From this we derive not only an (often absent) farmer's perspective for looking at urban food policy, but also chose to specifically explore the viability of a mixed agroecological agricultural system in which not only horticulture, but also arable and livestock farming

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⁶ active involvement in the platform 'De Hongerige Stad' (*the hungry city*), a movement of farmers, citizens and organisations that opposes the sale of public farmland and stresses its use value, www.dehongerigestad.be

have a crucial place (Visser, 2013). Furthermore, we build on the work of Schneider and McMichael (2010) and Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw (2006) to emphasise the potential of this debate, both for providing stepping stones towards restoring the epistemic and ecological rift between the urban and the rural, and to think agroecological food growing within a new urban political ecology that starts to think the natural process upon which food growing relies as an integral part of (the) urbanisation (of nature).

RESULTS

The research provides insight into (the evolution of) public land in Flanders. Some public institutions, especially local governments, structurally sell their historical legacy of public (farm)land. Other governments buy new land positions, but often do so for nature purposes forest creation and not (explicitly) to support agricultural policy. From a thorough analysis of the data in the Ghent city region, very concrete contributions can be made to ongoing discussions and issues in the urban food policy as we know it today. The following three points are dealt with in detail. (1) No (agricultural) policy is also a policy. The current, trivial way in which public farmland is managed undeniably has an agricultural impact. In particular, the current sales policy (driven by profit maximisation) and nature development policy (often in farmland) reinforce certain evolutions in agriculture and result, consciously or unconsciously, and indirectly, in a certain agricultural policy. (2) The problematic territorial lock-in of urban food policies. A significant part of public farmland owned by urban governments is situated outside their own territories. Cities such as Ghent use this as an argument for not intending to pursue a policy on these lands, while a city such as Brussels actively attempts to explore this path, greatly frustrating neighbouring municipalities and traditional voices in the agricultural sector. The contradictions within this argument can be illustrated by the map. (3) The incomplete new agricultural geography. The framework and space that cities create for pilot projects on public farmland have little or no agricultural rationale, and are very much geared towards horticulture. They thus write a new and incomplete agricultural geography, in which the importance of a mixed agricultural system does not seem to be a concern. By means of the map, this selectivity is questioned and discussed.

The analysis provides insights and 'talking points' that are relevant for the further exploration of the use value of public farmland, and for the development of urban food policy into what could also be considered meaningful urban agricultural policy. Developing the path towards such a programme is potentially transformative in itself. For the agroecological farmer community, exploring public policies for urban public farmland could emancipate agroecological farmers to move to a more strategic position, away from the line of fire of the urbanism of capital, towards the drawing board of a post-capitalist, non-extractive urbanism. It could be a way to bring back control over the means

to feed the urban community, and offer concrete tools to reskill that community, for example by bringing back local knowledge on seasonality. For urban dwellers and urban policies, constructing a strategic programme for public farmland in close collaboration with the agroecological community could make visible the ecological interdependence of the urban food system, and the ecological alienation of urban lives. This is a crucial prerequisite to bring about a paradigmatic change in urban food policies, and thus has the potential to reintroduce the urban food question in a far more engaged and vigorous way than what is common in mainstream debates about urban agriculture. It could motivate cities to aim higher on public farmland rather than accommodating a number of symbolic exceptions that prove the rule. One such possible pathways could be to think of collective infrastructure with a transformative capacity and spill-over effects at the level of the urban region.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Today, the world of agriculture and urban policy-making are still largely separate worlds that do not sufficiently realise what they could mean to each other and why it is relevant to interlink both. The case of the sale of public farmland is a painful illustration of an urbanism at the mercy of capitalism, and of the epistemic and ecological rift between the urban and the rural described by Schneider and McMichael (2010). However, this research reveals a potential use value of public farmland as a stepping stone towards the realisation of an agroecological transition in the urban food system. It is a challenge for further research to develop these opportunities from perspectives other than the ones explored in this paper. Such an exploration would include a range of strategies and tools, of which the use of public land, discussed in this paper, is only one.

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