

A photograph showing two women in a professional setting. On the left, a woman in a red dress is presenting a document to a woman in a black jacket on the right. They are both looking at the document. The background features a white wall with a logo and a colorful abstract painting.

Dutch City Network Feeds the Innovation of Urban Agriculture

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Alexandra van Huffelen, Alderman of Rotterdam (left) presents the UA charter to the Dutch Minister of Agriculture Sharon Dijksma (right).
Photo: City Network on Urban Agriculture

Since 2010, the Dutch City Network on Urban Agriculture (Stedennetwerk in Dutch), has linked up civil servants of fourteen cities in order to see opportunities, share knowledge and solve issues on urban agriculture in their cities. Though it started as an internally focused network for civil servants to learn and share experiences, the network gradually evolved into a more outward-oriented Community of Practice that seeks to incorporate a broader range of participants. Participants developed an urban agriculture charter to influence local and national policies in support of urban agriculture.

In recent years urban agriculture has been developing vigorously in the Netherlands. Community gardens have popped up in several cities, innovative entrepreneurs have started urban farms, and allotments are popular. Despite this growing interest, urban agriculture in the Netherlands remains small, fragmented and without coherence. It is a niche innovation, far from being part of routine practice. Cities can take the lead in embedding urban agriculture in

daily life by facilitating local initiatives, linking national and local policies and developing shared knowledge and experience. However, while local authorities see the value of urban agriculture, they struggle with their position concerning its development. Is it a hype or will it last? How should it be facilitated, and how could that be managed in times of budget cuts and loss of capacity?

Recognising the fragmentation of initiatives and the lack of urban political coherence, the Department of Applied Plant Research of Wageningen UR and the Netherlands Rural Network started to connect various pioneering cities. This resulted in a “City Network on urban agriculture”, whose main aims are to share and develop knowledge, exchange experiences, inspire with local practices, set local and national agendas and create legitimacy for urban agriculture by turning it into a serious perspective for city councils.

A niche between two regimes

In the Netherlands, 16.8 million people live on 3.4 million ha of land, making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with ca. 490 people per km². This tremendous urbanisation pressure fuels strict planning regulations focused on keeping the rural landscape open and undeveloped (Van Remmen and van der Burg, 2008). Regulations safeguard space for the Dutch agri-food complex; about 68% of Dutch open space is in agricultural

production (PBL, 2013). The Dutch agri-food complex is considered a competitive and a successful player on a global scale. The Netherlands is thus both an urbanised and an agricultural nation.

However, both the spatial planning and the agri-food system are under pressure in the Netherlands. Peak oil, food security, animal welfare and high carbon footprints shed doubt on the global agri-food system. The real-estate market – the motor behind Dutch planning – collapsed due to the financial crisis. This led to numerous vacant urban and periurban lots, and raised concerns over food provenance. Both issues stimulated an increase in a wide range of urban agriculture initiatives (Veen et al., 2012). Urban agriculture, in other words, was recognised and reinforced as a niche between the agri-food system and spatial planning. As food production becomes part of the urban landscape and civil society, municipalities can take the lead in facilitating the development of urban agriculture (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014).

The City Network on urban agriculture

In 2010, Wageningen UR and the Netherlands Rural Network brought together various pioneering cities with the aim to establish a “learning network” to support the development of urban agriculture in the Netherlands. In 2014, this City Network on urban agriculture (*Stedennetwerk Stadslandbouw*) consists of fourteen Dutch cities (figure 1). Most of the members are civil servants who “pioneer” with urban agriculture in their municipality to stimulate locally grown food and related social activities. Approximately four times a year they come together in network meetings. These meetings focus on learning clustered around three main topics: seeing, sharing and solving.

- *Seeing* refers to getting new input and inspiration. Meetings are organised in a different city each time so that members can visit each other’s initiatives. In addition, each meeting is organised around a central topic on



The City Network on Urban Agriculture links civil servants from 14 cities. Photo: City Network on Urban Agriculture



Discussion sessions make part of the network meetings. Photo: City Network on Urban Agriculture

which members share knowledge. Furthermore, local stakeholders are invited to give diverse input and points of view.

- *Sharing* refers to the exchange of knowledge, experiences and ideas between network members and, if necessary, specific experts from outside the network are invited to join the meetings. Sharing is also about developing a shared vision regarding urban agriculture’s future. The meetings offer ample opportunity for discussion and the network composition is relatively stable.
- *Solving*, finally, refers to the hands-on approach during the meetings. Common questions are distilled and members look for solutions together.

From a network to a Community of Practice

The City Network gradually developed from an internally focused, loose network towards an externally focused community, with the characteristics of a Community of Practice (CoP). A CoP is a group of people “*who share a passion for something that they know how to do, and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better*” (Wenger, 2004, p. 2). CoPs, like the City Network, share three fundamental characteristics of communities (Wenger, 2004): 1) Domain (i.e., urban agriculture); 2) Community (i.e., pioneering civil servants), and 3) Practice (i.e., local facilitation of UA). This development occurred in three main phases.

In the **first phase** the network consisted of individual pioneers who did not yet know each other, and were thus not connected. They were struggling with similar questions and similar ambitions – to get urban agriculture on the local agenda – and tried to achieve these in similar ways, by linking initiatives in the city. They had different approaches to urban agriculture, however, and practiced it with different goals in



Network meeting at Onze allotment gardens under glass, Almere. Photo: City Network on Urban Agriculture

mind (e.g., social cohesion, health or education). Moreover, urban agriculture in their cities was at different stages of development.

In the **second phase** the network took off: pioneers came together to learn from each other and share their experiences. Despite their different views, network members developed a common definition of urban agriculture (food production for the city, within the city region), and while specific aims differed, members shared the fact that none of them focused on food alone: social motivations were important for all cities. Also, almost all members had difficulties gaining support for urban agriculture from the city council and among colleagues. However, though there were differences between network members, there were commonalities as well, and these served as binding mechanisms. In this phase the network was mostly internally oriented, focused on dealing with the issues that members faced, and members developed a shared language.

We have now reached the **third phase** in which the network aims to gradually expand into a CoP that incorporates a broader range of participants. It is time for new input, time to share lessons learned with broader audiences and to connect with policy at the national level. The network is opening and scaling up and becoming externally oriented. Followers join the pioneers, enlarging the network. Pioneers share their knowledge and new knowledge is added. Social media provides a means to extend networks, by means of an open LinkedIn group for example. Also, the network started

with an international orientation, by cooperating with RUAF and ETC in the Oxfam Novib-funded GROW the City project, linking up RUAF's international urban agriculture experiences in cities such as Rosario, Lima, Toronto and Cape town (see pages 12-23). In this phase, the network also started to work on its impact and realised that decision makers need to be enticed to "look at the bigger picture of urban agriculture", that social benefits of UA may exceed public investments and that policy makers need to create their own legitimacy. The main challenge, then, is to put urban agriculture squarely on local and national agendas. In spring 2013, the City Network therefore launched its urban agriculture charter.

The urban agriculture charter

The urban agriculture charter addresses the steps necessary for urban agriculture to evolve from scattered initiatives into a coherent perspective. Four challenges are addressed: 1) create space for experimenting; 2) support regional food chains; 3) facilitate quality improvement, and 4) connect local initiatives. The charter also suggests actions for local and national authorities. The alderman of the city of Rotterdam embraced the idea of the charter and supported the network by bringing it to the attention of city councils. Presently, 25 city councils, including those of the cities of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Groningen, Utrecht, The Hague and Almere, have endorsed the charter. It has thus become an important tool for legitimising urban agriculture. This process shows as well that UA initiatives, although still fragile and fragmented, are increasingly supported by local and national authorities.



Discussion sessions make part of the network meetings. Photo: City Network on Urban Agriculture

Conclusions

In its initial stages, the Dutch City Network on Urban Agriculture supported network members by learning from each other and sharing experiences regarding how to deal with local issues. The network is now evolving, towards a broader Community of Practice that stimulates urban agriculture nationwide. The role of Wageningen UR and the Netherlands Rural Network was to bring people together and to facilitate the learning process.

The innovative nature of the network lies in the fact that it has enabled individual pioneers working in their municipalities to learn from, and connect to, others in similar situations. Through sharing visions, challenges and solutions they pointed the way for the future of urban agriculture. The City Network brought people together with central roles in connecting and facilitating local UA initiatives. A broad spectrum of connections was shaped by linking these central people in a national network. Being part of a network also legitimised members' (time) investment in UA. This is reinforced by the urban agriculture charter, which created a common language connecting different cities and contexts. Hence, cities can be a catalyst in innovating urban agriculture from a niche towards the mainstream.

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