

GOLD VI

**Case-Based Contribution
to Chapter 7: Renaturing**
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways
to urban and territorial equality*

Reviving Urban Agriculture

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Nairobi (Kenya); Bangkok (Thailand); Beirut (Lebanon)

CHAPTER

7: Renaturing

SUMMARY

A revival of urban agriculture before and during the COVID-19 pandemic is restoring local self-sufficiency and cooperation among communities from Bangkok (Thailand) to Beirut (Lebanon). This trend reconciles the divergence of urban lifestyles and natural space to re-imagine city and nature as one metabolism such that, when scaled up, limits the further invasion and extraction of the natural world to our peril, and restores shorter supply chains.

This chapter draws primarily on examples from Nairobi (Kenya), where CSOs, academia, community initiatives and local governance converge to create new norms of policy and practice. Experiences from Bangkok and Beirut echo this back-to-nature development through the production, distribution and consumption of local food. The lessons learnt from these cities demonstrate the importance of social production in the realization of a bundle of human needs and rights that increase dignity, gender equity and the means of subsistence through participation in more than just a therapeutic pastime with edible benefits. These practices also create interactions that can inform and improve local governance.

Introduction

Urban gardening can be more than just a therapeutic pastime with edible benefits. Its revival before and during the pandemic is restoring local self-sufficiency and cooperation among communities from Bangkok (Thailand) to Beirut (Lebanon). For generations, the evolution of lifestyles and physical space has produced binary development separating the urban and the natural dimensions from the integrated habitat approach that the serial Habitat Agendas committed to restore.¹ Despite such a global policy on paper, **re-imagining city and nature as one metabolism** still needs to expand in both theory and practice, not least to limit the further invasion and extraction of the natural world to our peril, and to create shorter supply chains where we live.



A woman selling her own vegetables from a *kibanda*, a small makeshift kiosk. Source: Samuel Ikua.

Nairobi, Kenya

Practicing that return to a greater balance with nature is exemplified by experiences in Kenya. The country's 2010 Constitution reversed the former ban on urban agriculture, premised on the notion that natural food production in the city was unhygienic and unsafe. For dense informal-settlement inhabitants, that prohibition increased costs, market dependency, waste and environmental decline, as well as hampered circular economies, biodiversity, optimum use of human and natural resources, economic opportunities and nutritional diets.

The constitutional reform also introduced an obligation on Kenya's 47 counties to develop and operate food security plans. That political shift enabled a practical change in inhabitants' relations with the land and their living space. It also has enhanced climate-change resilience and equalities across gender and income and across the city/nature divide. In 2015, **Nairobi City County**

(NCC) passed a law² supporting urban agriculture and joined the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact³ the next year, committing local government to develop inclusive and sustainable food systems that provide healthy and affordable food to all.

In Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, **almost half of the informal-sector trade involves food**. Farmers, processors and traders sell food that is either locally generated or brought in from the outlying areas, and an estimated 250,000 households generate food within the city limits.⁴ This vibrant system of daily production, distribution and consumption plays a vital role in supplying healthy fresh fruits, vegetables, milk products and livestock to Nairobi's four and a half million people.

Meanwhile, Kenya is one of the countries hard hit by climate change, threatening and actually disrupting city food supplies. The informal food system enables the

1. The habitat approach will "require a regional and cross-sectoral approach to human settlements planning, which places emphasis on rural/urban linkages and treats villages and cities as two [points] of a human settlements continuum in a common ecosystem." Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements [Istanbul Declaration] and The Habitat Agenda, A/CONF.165/14, 14 June 1996, para. 104, <http://www.un-documents.net/hab-ag.htm>.

2. The Nairobi City County Urban Agriculture Promotion and Regulation Act, *Nairobi City County Gazette Supplement*, 27 August 2015, <http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/Acts/>

3. Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/>.

4. Carolyn Fry, "Understanding Nairobi's Urban-agriculture Sector Helps Enhance Equality and Climate Resilience," *CGIAR Water, Land and Ecosystems*, 3 July 2020, <https://wle.cgiar.org/understanding-nairobi%E2%80%99s-urban-agriculture-sector-helps-enhance-equality-and-climate-resilience>; Samuel Ikua, "The impact of COVID-19 on the food system in Nairobi," *Thrive*, 15 October 2020, <https://wle.cgiar.org/thrive/2020/10/15/impact-covid-19-food-system-nairobi>.

resilience to shocks that policy makers insist vulnerable communities learn, as an alternative to preventing shocks or ensuring accountability for those responsible for the consequences.

In this context, the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research program on Water, Land and Ecosystems⁵ supported the Food, Agriculture and Forestry Sector of the NCC, through Nairobi's Mazingira Institute,⁶ and the RUAF Global Partnership⁷ joined forces to support this positive change by developing twelve inter-related indicators to help define Nairobi's food system within MUFPP criteria.⁸ Mazingira Institute and the Nairobi and Environs Food Security, Agriculture and Livestock Forum (NEFSALF)⁹ also further investigated women's and men's contributions to the city's food system, as well as its relationship to climate change.

Then, a survey of fresh fruit and vegetable sellers conducted by Wilfrid Laurier University¹⁰ compared a low-income area with a high-income neighborhood. Women selling fruit and vegetables from small kiosks dominated; while male produce vendors mostly sold from *mkokoteni* (mobile hand carts). Interestingly, the census revealed a much higher concentration of fresh produce outlets in the low-income area.

The gender division of labor shed light on certain biases and their economic outcomes. While more women sold produce, men dominated the supply chain through greater access to money and other resources. Women were more skilled at growing vegetables, while men excelled at raising livestock. Also, within animal husbandry, men have traditionally maintained large animals such as cattle as a source of wealth, while women tend to raise less-lucrative livestock such as goats and poultry.

These findings helped identify **disparities within the food system** and augmented the NCC's own policy research. For example, NCC discovered that urban farms are recycling much more organic waste than waste-management enterprises. This showed, in turn, the potential for urban farming to contribute even more to climate-change mitigation if organic production could be expanded. This led to adoption of municipal legislation providing a **framework for public participation** in management, protection and conservation of the environment.¹¹ The county government established several partnerships to set up facilities that add value to various waste streams, especially in areas with vulnerable individuals. Umoja estate was one such area where the county provided land for the local community to turn organic waste into clean energy biogas, benefiting 5,000 local households and restaurants.¹² On related innovation with a gender lens, NCC has been conducting a collaborative review of supply chains that involves children and youth of all genders in family farming, as well as training in negotiation skills.

5. CGIAR (formerly the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research), Research Program on Water Land and Ecosystems, <https://wle.cgiar.org/>.

6. Mazingira Institute, <https://mazinst.org/>.

7. RUAF Foundation (Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture), <https://ruaf.org/>.

8. Indicators related to enabling effective action (governance); sustainable diets and nutrition; social and economic equity; food production; food supply and distribution; waste, environment and the circular economy; fresh fruit and vegetable outlets, etc. See *The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Monitoring Framework* (Rome: FAO, MUFPP and Ruaf, 2019), <http://www.fao.org/3/ca6144en/CA6144EN.pdf>.

9. Michael Levenston, "NEFSALF: Nairobi (Kenya) and Environs Food Security, Agriculture and Livestock Forum," *City Farmer News* <https://cityfarmer.info/nefsalf-nairobi-kenya-and-environs-food-security-agriculture-and-livestock-forum/>.

10. Laine Young, Diana Lee-Smith and Joy Carey, "Adding a Gender Lens to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Monitoring Framework," *Urban Agriculture*, no. 37, July 2020, <https://edepot.wur.nl/535446>.

11. The Nairobi City County Solid Waste Management Act, No. 5 of 2015, 16 October 2015, <https://nairobiassembly.go.ke/ncca/wp-content/uploads/acts/2015/Nairobi-City-County-Solid-Waste-Act-2015.pdf>.

12. C40 Cities, "Umoja Estate: Nairobi Turns Organic Waste Into Clean Energy Biogas," 17 May 2019, https://www.c40.org/case_studies/umoja-estate-nairobi-turns-organic-waste-into-clean-energy-biogas.

Francisca selling locally produced food at the roadside.
Source: Samuel Ikua/Mazingira Institute.



The Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the food system and, in particular, its informal sector. Obtaining inputs became more difficult, sales dropped and consumers lost livelihoods and purchasing power. These factors exposed many to food insecurity as the deadly virus spread.

As seen in the Nairobi example, informal food operations can show remarkable coping capacity, local innovation, enhanced economic sustainability and re-balancing urban life with nature, especially when supported by a conducive political environment, knowledge creation and technical support. However, they can be highly vulnerable to systemic shocks, particularly systems that rely on complex supply chains. Such models are no panacea, but are also subject to structural inequalities in the society at large and dominant global systems.

In Nairobi, vegetable producers proved to be adaptable due to their local access to inputs, but larger livestock producers have suffered more, due to their reliance on long and complex supply chains for inputs. Traders sourcing supplies locally also have proved to be better off at adapting amid the global health crisis.

While Nairobi has emerged as a source of good “renaturing” examples in the pre-pandemic period, its adjustments toward urban agriculture have been ahead of coping trends made necessary elsewhere during the COVID-19. The pandemic has inspired numerous urban-agriculture and back-to-the-land strategies, even in contexts lacking policy support in Kenya following the 2010 constitutional reform.

Amid complex and protracted crises, we see de-urbanizing (return to the land) for food security, as well as renewed urban agriculture and access to land needed for food security during the pandemic. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) has proffered good-practice examples,¹³ whereby the provision and use of land in informal communities across **Thailand** has made the difference between life and certain peril during the lockdown. These have involved **partnership between civil society and various spheres of government**.

In a country famously lacking in supportive public policies and institutions, the people of **Lebanon** are also rediscovering their roots in the land and food production.¹⁴ Some call this popular response to public emergency an “agricultural *jihad*.”¹⁵ With 45% of the Lebanese population living below the poverty line already at the beginning of 2020,¹⁶ an estimated 75% of the population is now in need of aid.¹⁷ The loss of urban livelihoods, a precipitous drop in the value of the national currency, isolation measures, a nation-wide lockdown and destruction of Beirut’s port have forced much of the urban population to retreat to their rural family homes, if available.

In stark parallel to the urban rentier economy, the country does not need to import vegetables. Rich soil, diverse elevations and a conducive climate make vegetation diverse and prolific year-round. Farms and groves line the countryside, filling valleys, carpeting hillsides and providing local bounty. Reverting to this landscape, even urban youth are relearning the skills and practices of preceding generations.

Some rural municipalities in Lebanon are supporting this return to the land by **renting supplies to local residents with fertile land**.

13. Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, “4 Community Vegetable Gardens in Thailand”, October 2020, http://www.achr.net/upload/downloads/file_04112020135702.pdf.

14. Serene Abdul Baki, “Lebanon Returns to Agricultural Roots,” *Beirut Today*, 18 June 2020, <https://beirut-today.com/2020/06/18/from-dirt-to-dirt-agricultural-lebanon/>.

15. Vivian Yee, “Agricultural Jihad: A Hungry Lebanon Returns to Family Farms to Feed Itself,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/05/world/middleeast/lebanon-economic-crisis-farming.html>.

16. World Bank, “Targeting Poor Households in Lebanon,” 21 April 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2020/04/21/targeting-poor-households-in-lebanon>.

17. United Nations, “Lebanon ‘fast spiralling out of control’ leaving many destitute and facing starvation, warns Bachelet,” *UN News*, 10 July 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068141>.

The Progressive Socialist Party of Lebanon has been distributing seeds, even if on a partisan basis. Civil society and academic centers are also getting into the act. While the social movement of protests against the failed central government rose up in October 2019, the revolutionary spirit has expressed the need to “sew change,” in all senses of the term.

Life on the land is inherent to the culture and experience of indigenous people. However, the pandemic has evoked a particular **back-to-the-land reaction among urban-dwelling indigenous people**. In such times of crisis, survival may depend on the land and renaturing, but also provides a further impetus to restore land rights.¹⁸



Urban agriculture in Beirut.
Source: Jad Sarieeddine.

Conclusion

These experiences exemplify how renaturing is not only a “good practice” to achieve greater balance and equality across society and environment, indeed the entire human *habitat*. The dual context of pandemic and climate change raises the urgency of re-embedding urban systems compatibly within natural systems, a matter of survival at both local and planetary scales. Such renaturing, among other approaches, provides pathways to restore the vitality of both city and nature, while supporting the needs and identities of historically marginalized groups.

Amid our multiple global societal challenges, enhancing health and wellbeing are paramount. Protecting ecosystem services, sustainable (more circular) resource use, and resistance to climate change call for greater common effort to rekindle our common and organic relationship with land and nature, not least in the urban environment. The collaboration among local community members in these back-to-nature examples also forged new relationships with each other through social production, despite the cautionary social distancing through the pandemic.

18. Radio-Canada, “Canada : Autochtones appellent à retour à la terre,” *Radio-Canada*, 11 May 2020, https://ici.radio-canada.ca/espaces-autochtones/1701748/communautes-autochtones-retour-terre-norman-yakeleya-dene?fbclid=IwAR2vDE0llegzuBwxwQe6QYayJr_H7QzJP9jC_FxyovyhGCmVrasLGrXQfC8.

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In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 7 on “Renaturing”, which focuses on the governance and planning of nature-based solutions, with specific emphasis on decoupling economic development and resource use, the transition to net zero carbon systems, risk reduction and urban resilience. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote approaches that advance these goals, placing the needs and priorities of structurally discriminated social groups at the core of their actions, and contribute to urban and territorial equality.

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