Rooted: overcoming complacency in planning for greater food security in Australian cities

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Abstract: Established notions of food security focus on the availability, accessibility and affordability of food with much policy attention given to chronic and acute food shortages in developing countries. Closer to home, according to the Australian government's National Food Plan Green Paper we have a 'strong, safe and reliable food system with a high level of food security'. While we recognise that some Australians experience substantial problems in accessing affordable fresh food, there is little acknowledgement of the significance of systemic threats to the security of food supplies to Australia's cities that affect the majority of our urban residents. These threats are to increasingly long and complex supply lines as well as to the places and techniques of food production. Moreover, a rich legacy of suburban and peri-urban food production is in danger of being overlooked in national policy debates preoccupied with plant technologies and with potential Asian markets for a limited range of Australian-grown foods, including beef, wheat and dairy products.

However, as part of new plans to build greater urban resilience, local food security policies are emerging in some towns and cities. This paper reviews these processes of local food policy development in Australia, compares them with prominent examples from other similar countries and explores the barriers to further policy development and effective implementation. It draws on recently completed research on urban food security and climate change supported by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility.

Introduction

In his introduction to the National Food Plan, then Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Joe Ludwig recognizes that, 'our food system isn't just about high yield agriculture and exports, it is also about local communities growing, preparing and sharing food.' (DAFF, 2013: 3). However, Australia's attitude to food security is characterised mostly by complacency but with a pinch of irrelevance. Food security is not typically seen as a problem facing Australians (Lockie & Pietsche, 2012), only distant others – starving children in Africa or the victims of occasional natural disasters elsewhere in the world. Indeed, notwithstanding Minister Ludwig's remarks, the Commonwealth Government's National Food Plan celebrates the country's internal food security and welcomes its capacity to make a increasing contribution to global food security through the development and application of new agricultural technologies and the profitable export of food (see also PMSEIC, 2010).

In this paper, I argue that this attitude is complacent because of its neglect of two important factors, the increasing vulnerability of food supply chains and a planning environment which is not especially supportive of fledgling efforts to create more local sources of food. Both of these critical factors have a distinctly urban dimension in Australia as the majority of Australians live in cities and most consume food that is grown elsewhere. Indeed the food consumed in Australian cities is grown and processed in an increasing range of other countries and arrives in Australian cities along increasingly long and complex supply lines. These supply lines face a number of existential threats, including from extreme weather events associated with a changing climate, geopolitical instability and economic crises affecting globalised food markets.

Before looking more closely at the emergence and recent development of urban food planning and at some interesting cases of food planning in Australia, the paper considers broader questions of food security and food sovereignty.

Food security, food sovereignty and the rise of urban food planning

Food security has been part of the lexicon of international development since the middle of the 20th century, with the establishment of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1945 marking a significant moment in the history of attempts to deal with inequities in the global production and distribution of food. However, the concept of 'food security' has always been contentious and subject to political debate, with pragmatic notions focused on production techniques, global food markets and structural adjustment programs vying with more rights-based approaches and principles of entitlement (Mougeot, 2000). The FAO definition of food security as 'a situation that exists when all people, at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' is widely used as a starting point in policy debates but has been criticised for underplaying the capacity of individuals and groups to play a more prominent role in responding to food problems and for not recognizing the degrees of food security or insecurity that can exist (Shepherd, 2012).

New concepts of food sovereignty and food democracy have been proposed by those dissatisfied with the limitations of established notions of food security and both typically entail a more active (and activist) rights-based approach to achieving the end state described in the FAO definition. Both also typically focus on the rights of small scale producers to engage in more sustainable forms of agriculture and of consumers to access fair trade systems when buying their food (IPC, 2007; Lang, 2008). Institutions based on the principles of food sovereignty and food democracy, such as the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty and the international peasant movement, *La Via Campesina*, tend to place food at the centre of much broader campaigns to transform the social, political and economic relations that give rise to hunger and other forms of injustice.

As in other fields of global politics an important dimension to the development of debates about food security, sovereignty and democracy is the connection between developed and developing country circumstances and in particular the translation of issues of major significance in developing country contexts to developed country situations. While food insecurity in all its forms is most pronounced in developing countries it is no longer confined to them and as most of the world's population lives in cities it is now as much an urban as a rural phenomenon. Indeed the complex and changing relationship between rural areas of food production and urban areas of food consumption is now at the heart of the challenge of achieving greater food security, food sovereignty and food democracy in whichever context (Morgan & Sonnino, 2010).

Within Australia, there are signs of a growing concern with and for food. National concern about the prevalence of obesity and its impact on public health (Gill et al, 2010), economic concern about the consequences of the duopoly in food retailing (ACCC, 2008; Richards et al, 2011) and perennial concerns about the provenance and quality of food (eg Australian Government, 2011) all suggest that food politics is becoming more prominent in national as well as local political agendas. The barometer of television reflects this in the emergence of *River Cottage Australia* as a threat to the rating of *Grand Designs Australia* and in the success of *Masterchef* compared to *The Block,* but also highlights the susceptibility of the issue of food to the whims of political fashion and its vulnerability to designation (and indeed denigration) as a middle class preoccupation. I suggest that because food security is still often framed as a matter of mass famine, Australia's crude surpluses of food production and capacity to import foods otherwise unavailable locally underpins a position of policy complacency.

But there are signs of change and in a growing number of developed countries, food planning is developing beyond a concern with plant technologies and export opportunities. Morgan (2013) has described the transformation of an important element of urban planning practice and debate over the last decade to one in which,

> ..the planning community is now beginning to play an important role in trying to fashion a new and more sustainable food system, one that is better aligned with societal goals of public health, ecological integrity and social justice. (p1)

In a variety of papers published in a special issue of International Planning Studies a story emerges of exciting and promising local initiatives struggling to survive within local and state planning systems and food systems which do not typically offer fertile ground. Evidence from case studies presented later in this paper echo this view, but show also that urban food planning may slowly be finding a foothold in the mainstream of urban planning practice in some Australian cities. There is certainly growing interest in

learning more from the positive experiences of food planners in North America and in Europe, where the mainstreaming of metropolitan scale food planning is often more advanced than in Australia.

As part of a wider study of urban agriculture and food security, supported by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, case study research was conducted in Melbourne and the City of Gold Coast to explore a range of issues in local food planning. These issues emerged from a systematic review of recent literature on food security and urban agriculture in developed country settings and included the definition and scope of urban agriculture, factors helping and hindering its expansion and the role of planning in promoting urban agriculture as part of broader programs of building urban resilience. The field research involved face to face interviews as well as group discussions with urban agriculture practitioners, urban planners and other policy makers and some academics and researchers. The full report of this work is available in Burton et al, (2013).

The rest of this paper presents examples and cases from this research that illustrate the barriers faced in expanding urban agriculture and how these barriers are being overcome.

Barriers to urban agriculture

Despite centuries of relatively peaceful and productive co-existence, food production in the cities of the western world has come to be seen as something of an aberration or even as a contradiction in terms: agriculture being something that happens outside of cities (Gaynor, 2006). Our research revealed that with only a few exceptions the wide range of urban agricultural practitioners and some policy makers and practitioners within government bodies see that urban and peri-urban agriculture can play a significant role in supplying more food form local sources and in the process helping to build a more sustainable, fair and resilient city (Carey & McConnell, 2011). However, our participants identified three main sets of barriers to progress in this direction: political, economic, and cultural.

The principal political barrier is the lack of any strategic vision for sustainable and resilient food systems in Australian cities. This expresses itself most acutely in relation to the expansion of urban growth boundaries over prime farmland, but is seen also in the failure to fully integrate considerations of health and well-being into state and federal planning and policy frameworks (Budge, 2009). For example, the Brumby government in Victoria attempted to establish a state-wide, whole-of-government, integrated food strategy but this policy initiative, according to a number of our interviewees, 'ran into the sands of obstructionism' from within the Victorian Department of Primary Industries which was not convinced of the need for any such policy intervention.

> ..so we had a reasonable commitment to doing this...but it really just dragged... and when I look back now to some of the stuff we'd come up with, that we will do this whole-of-government food strategy, now we know that DPI was just basically stalling it, at every possible opportunity. You'd have everything agreed, everyone on side, and then you'd get this memo, saying, you can't have this, why don't you re-write it like that. And we'd be completely back to scratch... [State government employee]

> We took that many people from traditional DPI, who thought that food security is just about choice, and if people are fat, it's because they're eating the wrong food, through so many discussions of explaining, opening people's heads…I'm sure it had a lot of educational benefits for a lot of people, but [ultimately] it didn't deliver anything on the ground. [Former State government employee]

In reflecting on the failure of this attempt to establish an integrated and holistic state-wide food policy for Victoria, which would have given a prominent role to urban and peri-urban agriculture, and to the protection of prime farmland close to the city, this interviewee identified a culture inside the State government, especially at more senior levels, which strongly militates against any policy change of this nature:

> People would just say, agriculture's DPI, but that wasn't what I was talking about. So I really began to see how this handballing phenomena worked inside government; and that trying to get people to talk about complex issues who didn't have clear lines of responsibility was very difficult. You can get those conversations happening at officer level, and maybe at manager level, but it's very hard to get real openness to people above that [level] thinking outside the box. [Former State government employee]

Economically, the main concerns relate to the loss of high quality agricultural land, especially on the peri-urban fringes of cities, and to the ongoing viability of smaller. family owned and run food growing enterprises. In Queensland, the incoming Newman government commissioned an inquiry into the State's agricultural and resource industries, but this focused primarily on identifying and removing unnecessary regulatory barriers, and there is little recognition of land use conflicts except in relation to tensions between famers and miners in, for example, the Darling Downs and Bowen Basin.

Our interviews with the farmers and growers revealed also that urban sprawl was not their principal concern, nor was climate change. Rather, it was the commercial, financial and regulatory pressures they were facing, which took the form of a so-called 'cost-price squeeze' whereby as the cost of inputs rose and the burdens of regulation increased, the market dominance of the supermarket duopoly in Australia led to falling farm gate prices (Richards, Lawrence & Burch, 2011). One farmer described the dairy sector in these terms:

> There are basically three sectors in this industry: the good operators, with low levels of debt; the good operators, with high levels of debt; and those for whom it's just a struggle. That last group tends to be younger people, and they get very little returns   there were 33,000 dairy farmers in Victoria in the 1970s; now the country as a whole has 17,000. Two-thirds of the dairy farms in Gippsland have disappeared. [Dairy farmer, Mornington Peninsula]

For this farmer, these regulatory burdens constituted 'death by a thousand cuts':

> It's not any one thing – it's everything together. There's the cost of rural wages, and all the on-costs: super, Workcover, payroll tax. And then there's taxes on taxes, like the fire service levy, and parental leave. Four departments take their levies out of the milk cheque. Food safety is necessary, but the red tape is very difficult. There's no one-stop department, and reform doesn't happen, because bureaucrats have a vested interest in keeping things the way they are. [Dairy farmer, Mornington Peninsula]

In addition to important issues such as the loss of prime farmland to urban expansion, foreign ownership of agricultural land and land hoarding, interviewees also raised the issue of the corporate domination of the food system, and its impact on farmers, suppliers and consumers. The comparatively high degree of concentration of ownership within the Australian food system leads to the third barrier identified by interviewees, namely cultural factors of which there are two principal aspects. The first is the prevailing culture of cheap food including the prevalence and convenience of take-away foods, which can lead to widespread complacency about food, its provenance and availability and which is also helping to create a growing problem of food waste (Gustavsson et al, 2011). This complacency leads to the second aspect of the cultural barrier, a widespread lack of awareness of the key issues and problems concerning food systems, and willingness to engage with them:

> There is a real lack of awareness of the need to change. Most of the population is not aware. People need to be more uncomfortable, or have barriers to action removed... It's really troubling that so many people don't have basic food growing and preparation skills. There's a psychological shift that needs to happen, for people in general to value food growing as a worthy thing to do. [Permaculturalist and backyard gardener]

To illustrate the ways in which these political, economic and cultural factors come together to create barriers to local initiatives, the following case study shows in some detail how an environment which is in theory supportive can in practice present a plethora of problems.

As part of its support for 'an active and healthy community', the City of Gold Coast promotes community gardens and prepared a Community Gardens Start Up Kit for groups wanting to develop such a local initiative and appointed a dedicated worker to liaise with local groups planning a community garden. A number of Councillors also allocated funds from their Divisional budgets to support such initiatives in their own communities.

One such group formed after their Councillor called a public meeting to promote the idea of a community garden in the Division. They were pleased to learn that '..all we had to do was form a steering group and get 14 members signed up', which they achieved quickly. However, they quickly learned that they would either have to become an incorporated body or exist under the auspices of a relevant existing body, such as a larger community based, not-for-profit organization. Having approached a large national organization with a significant presence on the Gold Coast who agreed to act in this capacity, they then learned that this body was deemed by the Council not to be primarily concerned with urban agriculture and hence

unsuitable as the auspicing organization. They decided therefore to incorporate with the help of a local food activist experienced in helping establish groups.

The newly incorporated group was offered two possible sites for their garden by Council, with the then Community Gardens Support Officer (CGSO) saying of the preferred site, '...its ready to go', before having then to tell the group it was no longer suitable and they should look at all public parks in the neighbourhood and choose one that seemed to best suit their needs and preferences. Having identified a preferred site through this process, the group then began to work with the CGSO to draw up plans for the garden itself,

> '..so we were looking at our site and [CGSO] had helped us draw up our plan and everyone was getting very excited , it seemed very real but then we were told – oh no, sorry, you can't have this site because it's in a Q100 flood zone and therefore you can't have any built structures in the area at all'

The group then met with the Divisional Councillor and the latest CGSO to review all the suitable parks in the Division and identified one that appeared suitable, although with the added complication that it was a State park and would require a development application. As part of this process the Council wrote to local residents notifying them of the proposal to establish a community garden within the park:

> '..the residents of X Park called a public meeting, which some of us attended, and the residents were extremely aggressive and... getting very, very upset about the situation...it was going to bring down property prices. And then one of our members was actually accosted by someone who said – you won't get a garden there over my dead body, I don't want you hippies coming in selling your drugs and turning my kids into druggies. That was very hard for some of our members because most of them are older and retired..most of them are not gardeners at all...a lot of the regular members are single women, older, around 60.'

The experience of dealing with the Council was not especially encouraging for the group, although they recognised that support had been forthcoming from both officers and Councillors. The main problem appeared to have been in relation to communication and the lack of what might be called joined-up local governance. These issues were compounded by the group adopting a highly participatory style of organization, which of necessity required meetings of the membership to determine their requirements and preferences. Unsurprisingly, after over two years of planning for a community garden but not achieving one, the active membership of the group dwindled to between 10-20, out of a total membership of around 90.

This short case study illustrates how the best of intentions from a variety of prospective partners do not always lead to successful outcomes and may even frustrate people with initial enthusiasm. If the City of Gold Coast is to realize its ambition of supporting a city wide network of productive and flourishing community gardens and to extend this support to other forms of urban agriculture then it must re-state the political commitment to this aspect of its city building ambitions, ensure that different parts of the Council work more effectively together and allocate sufficient funds to make a difference. A review of local regulatory regimes to determine their impact on small scale urban agriculture with a view to reducing them would also be welcome. In May 2012 a new Council and Mayor were elected on a platform of being 'open for business', but it remains to be seen whether this extends to creating a more supportive environment for the growth of local urban agriculture initiatives as well as the more conventional sectors of development and tourism.

Overcoming the barriers

Despite the numerous barriers to the development of urban agriculture identified in the case study cities, various suggestions were made for overcoming them. These included offering more education about the practice of gardening at all levels; better integration of policies and activities by local governments; clear political leadership on the issue and sufficient staff resources especially at local government level.

Most of our interviewees were well aware of the prevailing political realities of their cities and states, which are not especially supportive of urban agriculture. When interviewees were asked about how their ideas for change might actually come about, many pointed to the need for a more educated and motivated populace to put pressure on their political leaders:

We need to create the space for government to move. For that to happen, the public needs to see food as more important; and so we need much greater understanding amongst the general public of the issues around food production, climate change, fair food, and so on. [Academic Researcher, Melbourne]

The lack of knowledge and awareness was constantly pointed out in the interviews as major barrier for both the would-be grower and the rest of the community. Consequently, an important way to address this barrier would be the provision of more high quality information in general, and more specific training in various aspects of food growing:

The training is vital. If you can't actually keep your plants alive and produce good stuff then it's going to be harder to keep people together. [Farmer, Gold Coast]

Organizations like the Organic Growers Association, CERES, Gold Coast Permaculture and many others hold the key to increasing capacity and helping to disseminate their knowledge about successfully growing organic crops:

We had a program with the Salvation Army here where we trained people on a 20 week course involving biological composting, garden planting and all the basic sort of stuff, so rather than just coming in and doing some laboring work, there was a good opportunity for us to give them some skills as well and make it a bit more meaningful. [Micro Farmer, Gold Coast]

Inspiration was also seen as an important element in the education and dissemination process, so that well run urban agricultural sites not only produce good and affordable food, but can also serve to inspire people and demonstrate the realities and potential of urban agriculture.

In a number of North American cities, Food Policy Councils are being formed to bring stakeholders from different food sectors together to examine how the food system operates and how it can be improved. These Food Policy Councils can also help educate public officials and the public, draft food policies and coordinate the multitude of often disparate local food programs. In Victoria, VicHealth supported the establishment of 'Local Food Policy Coalitions' that brought together over a dozen local councils in Melbourne and some regional areas and include a range of community-based stakeholders. The opportunity exists for these Coalitions in turn to be connected through formal coordination mechanisms and to feed into existing policy and community work already underway in a number of local governments.

Another valuable role that local governments can play is through the adoption of procurement policies that support locally grown food:

Government would be sending a clear signal, and creating demand for such foods by setting standards about public procurement. It won't be the sole answer, but could stimulate production to meet those requirements. [Academic Researcher, Melbourne]

The cost-price squeeze and the power of supermarkets were mentioned by commercial growers and others as a significant barrier. One way of addressing this is by supporting diversified distribution and retail outlets. Farmers' markets, supported by the Victorian Farmers' Markets certification scheme, have expanded significantly in Melbourne and beyond in the past decade while on the Gold Coast there is now a significant network or markets with plans for further growth. New distribution models similarly based around more direct forms of exchange between producers and consumers are also being trialed and scoped including the CERES FairFood, Gold Coast Permaculture and the Casey Food Hub project.

Land access and soil contamination were also major concerns for the expansion of agricultural practices within cities, especially in the inner parts of Melbourne, where land is scarce and known to be contaminated from previous land uses. It was suggested that local governments could conduct audits of public land that might potentially be used for food production, including identifying levels and types of contamination (Maribyrnong City Council, 2011).

As an alternative to the perceived lack of urban land and the fear of losing public parks to food growing activities and enterprises, the innovative way in which Gold Coast Permaculture currently grows food and runs a successful micro-business through the temporary leasing of private land offers a model for other urban food growers. In most Australian cities, opportunities exist for non-permanent food production enterprises to take over land on a temporary basis:

Developers are sitting on just thousands of hectares of space everywhere around Australia and there's really no reason why a lot of that land can't be given over to groups to grow food. We could

replicate this place half a dozen times without any problems whatsoever. [Micro Farmer, Gold Coast]

A possible solution to facilitate the use of private land on a mutually beneficial basis is through the temporary donation of a piece of land to a community organization, something that Gold Coast permaculture is also starting to pursue:

> In order to start locking away some of this private land, we are trying to aim for DGR [deductible gift recipient] status, so we can go to these corporations who are not going to use these lands for years, and we can say "how about you take a tax break by donating that to us". [Micro Farmer, Gold Coast]

Lastly, lack of funding is inevitably a major barrier to the development and expansion of urban agriculture and many of those interviewed recognised that simply expecting more money from local government was implausible and unsustainable. The approach taken by Gold Coast Permaculture is worthy of wider consideration: in addition to hiring out community garden beds, a series of micro-enterprises generate enough funds through the sale of vegetables, honey and compost to keep the whole organization solvent and relatively financially independent of Council. However, many Australian local governments do not allow community garden organizations to sell any of their produce and this serves as a major barrier to them becoming more economically viable and independent. A simple solution would see Councils allowing community gardens to sell some of their own produce to generate funds for the organization rather than for private profit.

Conclusions

We increasingly recognise a range of threats to our cities, including from economic crises, climate change and political instability. In many cities of the developing world these threats often combine to compromise food security and create the conditions for famine and systemic malnourishment. In cities of the developed world these threats are not so great, nor do they often combine to cause serious and persistent problems of food security. Nevertheless, there is growing recognition that the increasingly long and complex supply chains that bring most of the food we consume to our cities are vulnerable to these and other threats. In Queensland, the major floods of 2011 showed vividly what happens to the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables when the major regional distribution centre is under water and inoperable.

For these and other reasons, attention is once again turning to the capacity of cities to grow and process more of their own food. Bearing in mind that only a couple of generations ago, the proportion of food consumed in cities and grown commercially within the urban hinterland and domestically in suburban back gardens was much higher, there is scope to move again in this direction. However, times have changed and in a more regulated environment in which a substantial duopoly in food retailing has fuelled major changes to the organization of food growing and processing, it is unlikely that we could (even if we wanted) return to the situation that prevailed in our parents or grandparents time. Nor would most households have the time (or perhaps the inclination) to spend a much greater proportion of their time growing more of their own food.

Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence that the public at large are showing more concern for the food they eat, where it comes from and what has been done to it before they eat it. This concern is helping to drive the development of more local food systems, including within our cities. But as our cities continue to grow and generate new problems for planning and growth management, finding the space for urban agriculture is not easy (Pires & Burton, 2013). Nor is it easy building a political movement that can successfully harness the extraordinary diversity of views, positions and proposals that exist under the umbrella of urban food planning. In Australia and indeed many other developed countries the political challenge is to broaden the scope of food policy debates so that they transcend an urban middle class preoccupation with food provenance and hobby gardening and become part of wider considerations of public health, urban resilience and local community development. This will also require a more sophisticated re-calibration of the potential of local food production to meet local needs: there is at present an unfortunate tendency to suggest that urban agriculture could and should become the main source of food consumed within cities. This is highly unlikely to come to pass unless cities are beset by catastrophic shocks from war or environmental disasters.

The challenge for scholars of urban food systems and for urban food planners is to recognise this diversity of views, recognise the need for rigorous research on the operation of these systems and to help build

common cause among those committed to strengthening urban resilience. If we fail to rise to these challenges we will be well and truly rooted.

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