



# UN-HABITAT

2<sup>nd</sup> African Ministerial Conference on Housing and Urban Development

28 – 30 July 2008, Abuja, Nigeria



## Land and sustainable food production

According to the economic theory, urbanisation in the developed world was closely linked to an increase in productivity of agriculture, which forced people off the land and into the labour markets of the newly developed industries. Agriculture is therefore the so-called residual employer. With little or no increase in agricultural productivity, or even its outright decline due to environmental deterioration, and with insufficient formal employment opportunities in cities to absorb the exodus from the countryside, it is clear that Africa is going through premature urbanization and consequently, growing poverty.

One of the most significant manifestations of this growing poverty is food insecurity. The urban poor are largely unable to produce their own food requirements, as compared to their rural counterparts.

Though long-term migration to cities is unstoppable and part of the process of industrialisation, it is clear that African urbanisation is being fuelled by a number of factors. These include the failure of agricultural policies including poor marketing services, pressure on the land through population growth and the failure of land reform and, finally, the increasing number of regional and civil conflicts.

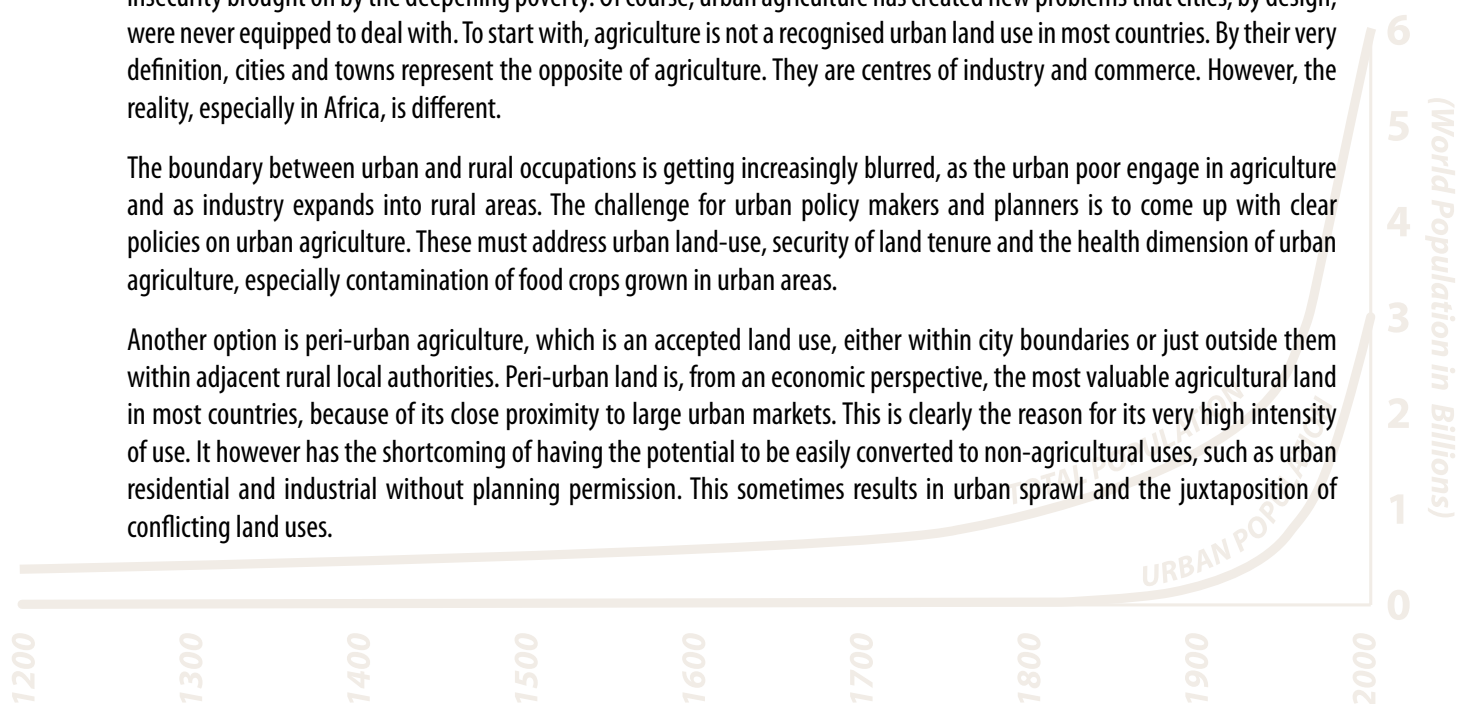
Urban agriculture is an integral yet sometimes unrecognized part of cities, adding that it produces 15-20 percent of the world's food. The failure of most African governments to tackle large-scale land reform has meant that this problem is becoming ever more critical especially as populations are expanding and there is more pressure on available land.

Moreover, the failure of investment in housing and infrastructure together with the lack of related policies governing land and property administration, and security of tenure means the poor are increasingly occupying marginal derelict land such as on hill slopes, flood prone areas, near land fills and along railroads and power installations leave ways. This land is not only potentially hazardous, but with the rise in urban property values, slum populations live under constant threat of eviction. Land ownership is caught between customary law and so-called modern statutory systems of land tenure.

In the case of land in urban areas, little progress has been made in providing access to land for pro-poor housing. Urban agriculture should therefore be seen as a spontaneous and innovative response by the urban poor to the situation of food insecurity brought on by the deepening poverty. Of course, urban agriculture has created new problems that cities, by design, were never equipped to deal with. To start with, agriculture is not a recognised urban land use in most countries. By their very definition, cities and towns represent the opposite of agriculture. They are centres of industry and commerce. However, the reality, especially in Africa, is different.

The boundary between urban and rural occupations is getting increasingly blurred, as the urban poor engage in agriculture and as industry expands into rural areas. The challenge for urban policy makers and planners is to come up with clear policies on urban agriculture. These must address urban land-use, security of land tenure and the health dimension of urban agriculture, especially contamination of food crops grown in urban areas.

Another option is peri-urban agriculture, which is an accepted land use, either within city boundaries or just outside them within adjacent rural local authorities. Peri-urban land is, from an economic perspective, the most valuable agricultural land in most countries, because of its close proximity to large urban markets. This is clearly the reason for its very high intensity of use. It however has the shortcoming of having the potential to be easily converted to non-agricultural uses, such as urban residential and industrial without planning permission. This sometimes results in urban sprawl and the juxtaposition of conflicting land uses.



Governments and local authorities should therefore pursue the necessary policies in order to ensure the best use of peri-urban land and an orderly urban-rural transition, with due consideration of the land tenure aspects. We also need policies that address the issue of food production nearer to where the urban poor live which will in turn make peri-urban agriculture extremely important in feeding cities and towns.

The role of urban women and the difficulties that they face in their many daily struggles for food security, and in turn, sustainable food production is another important aspect that needs to be addressed. Even within households headed by men, women bear the brunt of food insecurity because of their primary responsibility of feeding their families. In both situations, urban women are in the forefront of the struggle for food security at the household level. Studies have revealed that women constitute the majority of participants in urban agriculture, which is one of the most prevalent responses to urban food insecurity within African cities. We need to ensure that women have the same access as men to the household assets that are necessary for realising urban food security, including land with secure tenure. Women need equal access to extension services and credit facilities.

This is a UN-HABITAT Feature/Backgrounder, please feel free to publish or quote from this article provided UN-HABITAT Features are given credit. Suitable photographs are available on our website. **For more information, please contact:** *Spokesperson & Head, Press & Media Relations Unit, or Media Liaison,* Tel: (254 20) 762 3153; 762 3151; Fax: (254 20) 762 4060; E-mail: [habitat.press@unhabitat.org](mailto:habitat.press@unhabitat.org); Website: [www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org).