

Sustainability of Urban Community Gardens in Gweru - Zimbabwe: The Case of Senga Area

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the community gardens of Senga with the guidance of literature on urban agriculture in a bid to expose the sustainability of an urban agricultural project that has been approached from a participatory approach. The residents are involved as beneficiaries and the council is involved as the land owner, Care International comes in with technical and resource assistance. The enthusiasm with which the three parties are approaching the project has made it sustainable in a country where other urban agricultural projects are creating controversy. Apart from employment creation, food security, compatibility of the project with household work and a ready market for fresh farm produce are some of the factors that have made the community gardens in Senga a sustainable project. To come up with relevant data for this paper a convenient sample of the residents was drawn and handed questionnaires whilst in the gardens and the management of both Care and Gweru city council were purposively sampled and interviewed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to expose the sustainability or non-sustainability thereof of community gardens in urban areas. To arrive at a decision on whether urban market gardens done at community level are sustainable or not sustainable the paper will explore the reasons for the prevalence of urban agriculture and then apply the theory to the aspect of urban agriculture partaken at community level, with the authority of the city and the assistance from civic society as is the case in Gweru today. Gweru is the biggest urban centre in Midlands province of Zimbabwe. Situated 276 kilometres from the capital city Harare, in ecological region 3 with cattle ranging and maize production being the main agricultural activities in the district. The population of Gweru city stands at around 200 000 making Gweru the fourth largest city in Zimbabwe. Among the inhabitants of Gweru is glaring poverty due to the unstable economy, high unemployment levels, and growing number of the old aged inhabitants, the HIV and AIDS scare. CARE International saw that there was growing poverty among the residents of Gweru and especial the high density areas of Senga, Nehosho, Mkoba, Mambo and Mtapa. Care International then made consultations with Gweru city council to ascertain the land use plans with a view to create community gardens. With the full authority from council 52 gardens were created and distributed to deserving candidates in 2010. The allocation of community gardens signalled the beginning of local government supported urban agriculture in Gweru. The purpose of this paper is to examine the sustainability of the community gardens that have been running in Gweru for the last three years. To arrive at a conclusion as to whether the gardens that the people of Gweru are working on with support from Care International and Gweru City Council can be considered as sustainable or not a research was carried out.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability

Harris ^[1] wrote that “the World Commission on Economic Development 1987 (WCED). saw sustainable development as people centred development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Hence the sustainability of a project needs to lie in not only being people centred but also in preserving the existing resources for future generations. WCED argues that “sustainable development can only be achieved using partnerships with effective collaboration between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors”. The Senga community gardens fit into this model. Hence, there is a strong factor towards sustainability in those gardens.

Basiago ^[2] defined sustainability as “an organizing principle governing activities at all levels of a system, a quality that characterises social alternatives that yield vitality”. This observation by Basiago strongly complements the Brundtland definition and will assist the writer to investigate the sustainability of the activities under review. By seeking to observe the organizing principles, in use and singling out any alternatives that may be in place in the Senga gardens.

Barton ^[3] put forward the concept of environmental sustainability and that of economic development. This concept will also help as it points at the issues of the environment that is being worked on to see how it will survive the on slot being exercised by the residents with full support from civic society and the local authority. Lele ^[4] supported Barton when he looked at sustainability as “the existence of the ecological conditions necessary to support human life at a specified level of wellbeing through future generations or ecological sustainability”.

Harris ^[1] also advanced the concepts of economic and social sustainability. “An economically sustainable system must be able to produce goods and services on a continuing basis...while a socially sustainable system must achieve fairness in distribution and opportunity.”

The paper seeks to observe whether there is sustainability in the operations of community gardens in Senga. The sustainability that is being sort can only be achieved through the judicious use of natural resources as well as the equitable distribution of the resources to address human needs in Senga continuing production and fairness in opportunities. By observing the operations, outputs and behaviour of the participants this paper will be able to conclude whether the Senga community gardens are preserving the environment and supporting life at an improved well-being with the hope that they will go into the future so that at the end a conclusion is drawn to point at the sustainability or non-sustainability of the community gardens in Gweru.

Urban Agriculture

Sub-Saharan African countries, Zimbabwe included have formulated poverty reduction policies with increased emphasis on agricultural development. The policies have focused on rural agriculture. Without due hid to urban food production systems. Leading to conclude that the existing assumption among agricultural policy makers is that, the hinder land will supply all food requirements to the urban areas. A clear sign that urban agriculture remains neglected which is complemented by the conclusion that Mbiba ^[5] arrived at when he states that urban agriculture has minimum contribution in Zimbabwe.

Even the existing literature is clear that urban agriculture has not yet developed to levels of acceptability equivalent to rural agriculture. Hence the need to examine the sustainability of community gardens in urban setups by examining the Senga community gardens of Gweru. Mbiba ^[5] defined urban agriculture as the production of crops and livestock on land which is administered and legally zoned for urban use. Kekana ^[6] saw urban agriculture as an informal set of activities focusing on farm production in an urban setting. Both definitions undermined urban agriculture to an extent. The informal position that they saw in urban agriculture is no longer the case in Gweru leading to the need for further investigations on the sustainability of officially determined and privately funded urban agriculture in the form of community gardens.

A more acceptable definition of urban agriculture for the purposes of this research is given by the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research ^[7] who define urban agriculture “as any form and scale of agriculture activity that happens within the boundaries of the urban environment. It can include horticulture, floriculture, forestry, and aquaculture and livestock.” The community gardens in Senga will therefore be seen as a form of urban agriculture that is taking place/practiced on public land with the full authority of Gweru city council. The focus of this paper is to establish whether the Senga community gardens can be regarded as a sustainable project that is taking place in Gweru, bearing in mind that urban agriculture is still looked down up in Zimbabwe and also that sustainability is multi-dimensional as the discussion above has revealed.

Why Urban Agriculture

Maxwell [8] gave the following as some of the reasons for the emergence and prevalence of urban agriculture... “rapid urbanization, agricultural policies, crippled domestic food systems, constrained public spending and subsidies, wage cuts, soaring inflation, rising unemployment, lax land use regulations enforcement”.

Mbiba [5], Maxwell and Devereux [8], Maxwell and Zziwa [9], Djurfelds [10] saw a lot of benefits from the practice of urban agriculture to include expanding the economic base through production, processing packaging and marketing of food, creation of jobs, and increasing entrepreneurial activities, reducing the cost of food and making available better quality food products.

METHODOLOGY

The study sort relevant data from the residents of Senga, Council officials and the Care International Officials in Gweru. A total of 420 people are involved in the community gardens of Senga. Fifty residents were given questionnaires making an 11% sample that was conveniently drawn by giving the questionnaire to residents who visited their plots over a period of one week. Care International management was considered as key informants. Two managers were who are directly involved in the management of the gardens were interviewed and they expressed optimism on the project. The Director of housing and community services in Gweru City council was interviewed as a key informant in the project as well.

The respondents indicated that they are involved in agriculture in the community gardens in order to create food for their families in these hard times. From the responses given by the residents of Senga sustainability is evident in the Senga community gardens. The community gardens provide employment, income and access to food for the urban population. The gardens are serving a purpose that is being appreciated by the people that points at sustainability.

The activities that take place in the community gardens are compatible with house hold chose and child care in the home. Mothers who are the majority of plots holders in the Senga community gardens at 70% have time to do their farming and selling activity as well as look after their children. Since the gardens are not competing with any other activities for time they should be considered as a sustainable enterprise.

The community gardens give women a stronger role in the household through having control over household food production. The women do production in the gardens the food they produce finds its way into the household tables making mothers the producers of the family food. The gardens have put food security in the hands of the mothers in Senga. The Senga women are now empowered. The above supports Barton [3], who views strategies that empower the poor as creating space towards sustainability.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data Analysis

100% of the respondents indicated that they are benefiting from community gardens as indicated in **Figure 1** above. All respondents supported the fact that they are benefiting from the gardens in getting food at their tables, an income for the family, and some employment for themselves.

people benefiting from gardens

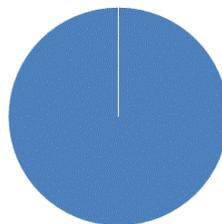


Figure 1: People benefiting from gardens.

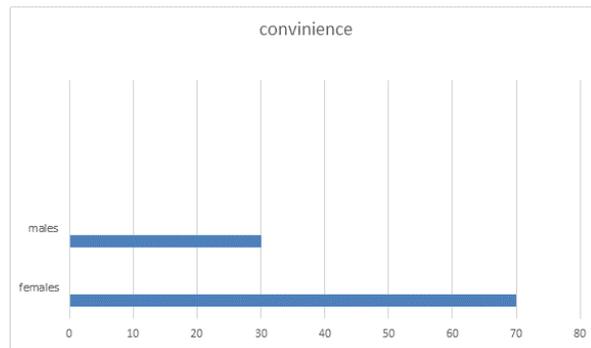


Figure 2: Convenience of community gardens.

70% of the respondents **Figure 2** above, who were female indicated that they find the gardens convenient as they are located close to their places of residences. They have time to care for their children as well as work in the gardens.

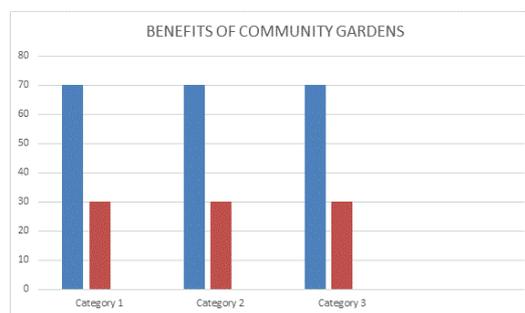


Figure 3: Benefits of community gardens.

All respondents indicated that they benefit from community gardens 70% who were female said the benefit by getting something to do (employment) and 30% indicated that they are also getting employment. In second category 70% who are female said they are getting food for their families and 30% males supported that as well. Both categories also indicated that they are getting an income from the gardens as shown in **Figure 3**.

To the Senga residents the gardens are also viewed as social meeting places where people meet and pass time while doing something productive. Families and local communities come together and work for a common goal. The social meetings are made more interesting by the little assistance that comes from the door (Care International).

The residence also indicated that the gardens were issued to the poor hence they are making a contribution to livelihoods in Gweru.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The Director of Housing and Community Services for Gweru City Council, was of the opinion that the community gardens will make a big difference to the city. Creating hundreds of jobs and making enough cheap food available. The community gardens make food more affordable by utilizing available resources like household waste compost, wastewater and organic sold waste. They have made sure that there is a link between the locality and the move to meet the local people’s requirements. Creating what Lele ^[4] described as the design and management of urban areas which reflect its potential in terms of economic potential, ecology, landscape, and available resources, a reflection of sustainability.

According to the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) personal the Senga gardens are not a threat to the environment since they avoided the wetlands. The Gardens are not prone to cause erosion and the removal of top soil which are sure threats to sustainability.

The management of the supporting Non-governmental organisation (CARE) where of the view that the gardens would benefit the disadvantaged members of the community and bring some food to their tables.

DISCUSSION

Since Gweru city council has plenty of land the community gardens can be viewed as land that the local authority has entrusted into the hands of the residents for their own utilization and management. The local authority knows areas that are not yet targeted for development and it is those stretches of land that can be utilized for community gardens if the

gardens are to be sustainable. Here one observes the use of own strategies to empower the communities through community involvement with the aim of reducing poverty. The people of Senga themselves are making decisions as to which crops to grow. Crops that best suit them utilizing available resources to help in solving their problems. Such a project should be sustainable.

The people of Senga like all Zimbabweans have good farming backgrounds. For those without, farming in small plots is easy to learn creating a crop of good farmers who can guarantee continued productivity in the community gardens. The technical assistance from Care International tops up the advantages of the project the residence revealed. Sustainability in the Senga community gardens is also guaranteed because the residents indicated that the gardens were distributed to the poor and disadvantaged members of the community. That level of distribution is in sharp contrast to what was seen by Reuther and Dewar ^[11] when they wrote that..” the poorest of the poor rarely engage in urban agriculture because they lack access to land on which to cultivate owing to the gate keeping strategies of the less poor and more established who control existing resources and exclude poor newcomers.” The poor and disadvantaged in Senga are the ones who are in charge of the community gardens.

The community gardens are easily accessible an ideal choice for the urban poor as a poverty alleviation strategy. It does not take any resources to go and attend to the community gardens making a point towards sustainability as people can continue to tend their crops in the gardens without spending any resources on transport.

Even the issue of tools that Reuther and Dewar ^[11] observed as an inhibiting factor does not apply in Senga since the tools and seed were initial distributed for free. The poor who have few surplus resources to invest in tools and seeds were given the start-up seed and tools by Care international. Whilst Senga and Nehosho areas of Gweru have a small population of permanent residents. The availability of a ready market from among the Midlands State University students is also a factor for the sustainability of the Senga gardens. The location of the Senga gardens does not help when it comes to the creation of green belts because these have always been there contrasting Mbuli ^[12] and Reuther's ^[11] views when they saw urban agriculture improving the quality of the urban environment through the introduction of green space that will result in the reduction of pollution in the air and in rain water. For Senga issues of pollution of both rain water and air are not as critical because it is far from the industrial areas. However, the production of food in Senga in the community gardens remains a sustainable project because it is properly arranged and managed by both Care and Gweru City council. One does not expect the gardens to contribute towards environmental degradation. But to produce food for resale in the Gweru markets at Kudzanayi and Kombayi markets, reducing food transport costs and also bring to the Gweru residents table fresh farm produce.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the study that the Senga community gardens are a sustainable project because of the set up that involves Gweru city Council, Care International, and the residents in the management of the community gardens. The siting of the gardens was done professionally and they have been fenced off to protect the gardens from roaming animals. The gardens have been allocated to the poor and neediest, resulting in serious utilization of the land. The people who were allocated the land have vast experience on the land as communal farmers, farm workers and or their children. The output has a ready market in the farmer's family, Midlands State University students and the Gweru community at large. However there are minor factors militating against feasibility on the Senga community gardens these include the lack of seed due to the evident poverty and the unavailability of water due to borehole breakdowns. On the whole the community gardens are a sustainable project.

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