

POLICY BRIEFING



Research Centre
for Agroecology, Water
and Resilience



Economic
and Social
Research Council

June 2024

POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

MOVE BEYOND URBAN CENTRED UN POLICY GOALS AND FOCUS ON THE WAY URBANIZATION IS ACCOMMODATED

We urge UN-Habitat to address the growing impact of urbanization not only in the urban centres. Sustainable urban areas are underpinned by complex economic, socio-cultural and ecological relationships of mutual interdependence and care between urban and rural communities.

INCORPORATE PRINCIPLES OF AGROECOLOGY INTO SUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION

UN-Habitat needs to embrace the ecological and social values of agroecology as the preferred models for sustainable agriculture in urban and peri-urban areas, and adopt soil health as a new narrative for spatial planning.

ENSURE THAT GUIDANCE TO NATIONAL PLANNING AUTHORITIES SEEKS TO HALT FARMLAND LOSS

Identify the multiple impacts of urbanisation on ecological resources and adopt the policy directions suggested here to attempt to restore them. Encourage local authorities to understand the ability of agroecological farming to address simultaneously national carbon and biodiversity targets (which tend to compete with local food production within public land management decision making).

PROMOTE NEW POLITICAL ARENAS FOR BUILDING AGROECOLOGICAL URBANISM

Use UN-Habitat's steering role and influence with local governments to promote political processes for achieving all eight building blocks of agroecological urbanism as described in this paper. This should include ensuring farmers' representation and active participation within urban food strategy/partnership platforms.

AGROECOLOGICAL URBANISM: What is it, why we need it, and the role of UN-Habitat

Current urbanisation approaches drive climate change, soil destruction, biodiversity loss, people's alienation from nature, and unsustainable and unhealthy diets. To achieve sustainable urbanisation we need coherent and integrated urban and agricultural policies, that radically transform how we urbanise. Agroecological urbanism is a promising model, addressing simultaneously the challenges of climate change, soil regeneration, resource conservation and sustainable farming, while developing sustainable and socially just urban habitats and livelihoods. This brief suggests ways in which UN-Habitat, whose influence is key at the rural-urban interface, can adopt and promote this approach.

Three policy divides at the root of unsustainable urbanisation and food systems

Sustainable farming, sustainable food systems, sustainable urbanisation, climate change and social equity are among the major global challenges targeted by research and policy. However, despite increased efforts in intersectoral and participatory work, many gaps and contradictory objectives remain between urban and agricultural policy around the world. In this paper we explore these contradictions, drawing on our work with farmers, policy makers and scholars across both natural and social sciences. We then apply this analysis specifically to the United Nations system, and especially UN-Habitat, which has significant influence at the rural-urban interface.

Our research has identified three longstanding divides within and across policy fields that are at the root of the problem:

An urban-rural divide in planning policy. Urbanism⁽¹⁾ and urbanisation are only seen as concerns for urban contexts, ignoring the impact of urban activities and extraction on rural resources and people. For example, peri-urban farming environments are progressively engulfed in formal or informal suburbanisation processes, contributing to soil pollution and degradation within expanding metropolitan areas or urban slums. Urban and rural planning are separate fields catering to largely separate policy arenas, with food and agriculture placed on the rural side. This urban-rural divide is reflected in the organisation of UN directorates as well as national and regional organisations.

A housing-agriculture-nature divide in urban policy. Exclusive zoning to protect farmland from urban expansion make it difficult for small farmers to live and work on farm. Access to land for food production and housing are viewed as distinct problems, yet farmers often experience them simultaneously (standard housing policies are not fit for farmers who need housing close to their land). Likewise, nature-protection measures contribute to the separation of green-blue infrastructure and farmland, cutting off farmsteads from the landscape ecology they are part of.

A producer-consumer divide in sustainable food systems policy. Most current 'sustainable food policy' is geared towards consumers (e.g. food waste reduction policies, healthy diets policies, etc.), without meaningful engagement of farming communities in shaping strategies and visions.

Our analysis reveals how these three policy divides are also reflected in UN-Habitat's work. There is little consideration of food and agriculture (and no clear positioning for sustainable agriculture) within UN-Habitat's core thematic working areas (perhaps with the exception of the rural-urban links strand of work). Despite its involvement in several UN processes for food system transformation, such as the UN Food

System Summit 2021, there is little meaningful contribution of urban and urbanism debates within such fora. UN-Habitat's take on food systems seems to lack a clear transformative vision and maintains an agenda of food security for an ever-growing urban population, accepting the further development of cities at the expense of a depopulated countryside.

	KEY CHALLENGES	KEY CONSEQUENCES
RURAL URBAN DIVIDE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic undervaluing of healthy farmland • Fragmentation and underfunding of farmers' infrastructure • Erosion and loss of agricultural livelihoods • Speculative urban development on farmland 	Loss of agricultural lands
HOUSING AGRICULTURE NATURE DIVIDE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural-urban migration and loss of farmers • Planning policies not fit for farmers • Urban food waste management unfit for nutrient recovery • No support for soil care and urban sourcing of organic matter 	Contamination, degradation and destruction of soils
PRODUCER CONSUMER DIVIDE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban food policy over-focused on consumption • Farmers' concerns not taken into account in urban food policy 	Loss of agroecological and family farmers
		Loss of food Knowledge

Table 1: How policy divides challenge sustainable urbanisation and food systems

Consequences for food producers and consumers

These deep-seated and longstanding divides continue to challenge living and working conditions for both farmers and consumers, reinforcing patterns of unsustainable urbanisation and food systems in four main areas:

1) The loss of agricultural land. With 80% of urban growth occurring on agricultural land, and 78% of lost agricultural land on urban fringes (EEA) at a time of population growth, growing food demands, and climate change, this is widely recognised as a key problem within UN and EU policy and research arenas. However, within UN directorates the problem is framed in highly sectoral ways. Climate action is predominantly translated into compact city models supplemented with nature-restoration programmes in the 'open space' outside the city, increasingly locking peri-urban farmers between land taken for urban expansion and farmland used for nature development goals. It is evident that national carbon and biodiversity targets are in competition with local food production within public land management decision making.

Despite the adoption of net zero land consumption targets, and a growing awareness of the devastating impact of urbanisation on soils and farmland, the ongoing marginalisation of farming activities is reproduced through local development policies that play off housing against food, and keep housing prices low through the conversion of urban (farm) land into urban real estate.

The challenge here is to remove the urban bias in human development programmes, which continue to describe

rural-to-urban migration as the only and necessary path towards improved welfare and standards of living, coupled with a transition to large-scale industrial agriculture systems (UN-Habitat, 2020). This approach overlooks the devastating impact on the countryside and the threat this poses to global sustainable development.

2) Contamination, degradation and destruction of urban and peri-urban soils through urban development, causing leakage of pollutants onto land and into waterways, and the erosion and loss of soil organic matter and topsoil. The fragmentation of land in peri-urban environments disrupts mixed farming and farmers' ability to collaborate around soil fertility management or to manage nutrient cycles at the landscape level. Despite soil health becoming more central to funders' research agendas with the recognition of the economic and ecological opportunities of promoting circular cycles of waste resources, local planning policies are often locked into outdated views of farming. By labelling the composting of urban organic food waste as 'waste management' rather than a legitimate component of a farming cycle, planning law effectively bans urban-fringe agroecological farmers from leading soil remediation actions and improving soil fertility through handling urban organic waste.

3) Loss of agroecological and family farmers.

Misconstrued ideas of development that reproduce underinvestment in peri-urban farming infrastructure or farmland fragmentation deny farmers the ability to build economically and ecologically sustainable livelihoods. Unshielded from competition with an industrial farming sector that continues to receive structural and financial state support (i.e. through high-tech farming, retail, and long-transport infrastructure), they are often put out of business (in the past two decades the EU alone has lost 30% of its farmers). Agroecological farmers' ecological stewardship remains socially devalued, and peri-urban farmers continue to be absent from urban constituencies and local governance arenas for food system transformation.

4) Loss of food knowledge. Most of the above problems are a direct result of a widening epistemic rift that reinforces the belief in binaries such as humans-nature, urban-rural, white-others, producers-consumers. This rift breaks apart what in fact is a unity, making it impossible to see that everything is interconnected, co-produced and co-dependent. The rift is widened by ecological and food knowledge loss that rips apart bodies and livelihoods, and feeds illness and poverty. Women – who largely shoulder the food-provision workload – are often the most affected within both agroecological farming and urban consumer communities, where patriarchy and gendered dynamics continue to dominate and shape decision making and power relations across communities and governance arenas.

Agroecological urbanism: a new framework for social repair and policy integration

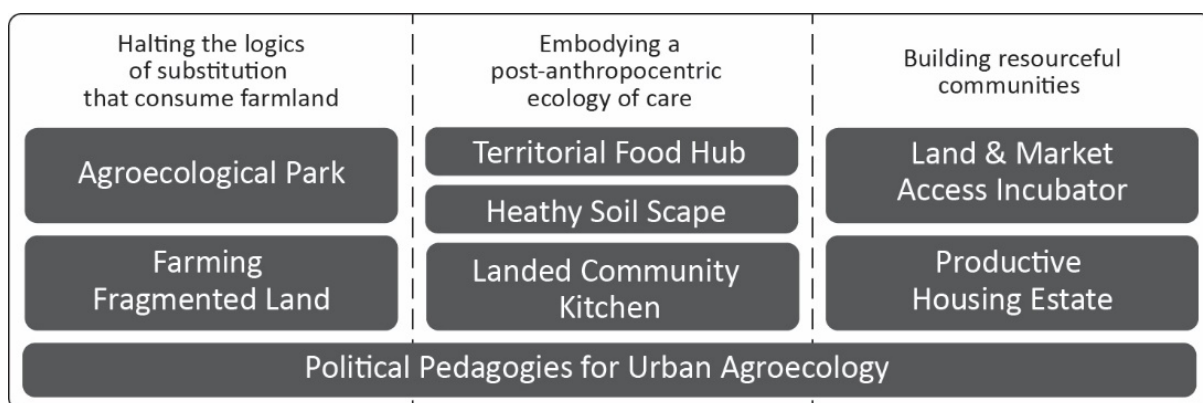
The divides in policy domains and the consequences and challenges that they pose require a paradigmatic change in the way urbanisation unfolds. Agroecological⁽²⁾ urbanism is an opportunity to challenge, bridge and heal the multiple divides. It refers to an innovative model of urbanisation that is built on agroecological wisdom, and addresses simultaneously the challenges of climate change, soil regeneration, resource conservation and sustainable farming, while developing sustainable and socially-just urban habitats and livelihoods. By centring its action simultaneously on producers and consumers, rural and urban environments, and the biodiversity-housing-agriculture nexus, it recognises that opportunities, investments and problems in one sphere affect the other spheres and require an holistic approach.

It specifically embraces the need to centre action around a politics of knowledge across the policy sector, and to train civil servants in intersectoral and transdisciplinary

collaboration. In short, an agroecological urbanism paves the way for a paradigmatic change in the way we live on earth.

The agroecological urbanism framework identifies three pillars, which can be implemented through eight main building blocks for new relationships between urban and farming communities, leading to renewed, sustainable and resilient food systems and urbanisation (Figure 1). Such an approach can rearticulate the relations between communities engaged in land cultivation and soil stewardship, and urban constituencies dependent on increasingly globalised and highly commodified food systems (over which they have little control) within ever expanding and transforming urban environments.

Figure 1 – Agroecological urbanism: eight areas of re-articulation between farming and urban constituencies



NOTES

(1) The term “urbanism” has many connotations. In this text it is used to refer to the body of ideas and values, rooted in specific economic and social organisation models, that gives shape to ways of organising urban life through the planning of services and land management. In this sense, urbanism shapes urbanisation.

(2) Agroecology is a paradigm for agriculture and food systems that is simultaneously: (a) the application of ecological principles to food and farming systems that emerge from specific socioecological and cultural contexts in place-based territories; and (b) a social and political process that centres the knowledge and agency of Indigenous peoples and peasants in determining agri-food system policy and practice.” (Pimbert et al., 2021).

Pillar 1) Halting the logics of substitution that consume farmland (and turn it into speculative development) can be achieved through public policy that manages peri-urban fringe farmland and urban fragmented land in ways that build collaborative, thriving and resilient food and farming systems. Instead of allowing the systematic sale of farmland, public policy can set up agroecological parks in urban fringes for productive or pedagogical purposes (e.g farm starts) and view fragmented lands as assets for the organisation of agroecological farms (and their circular resource cycles) at landscape level by coordinating small, specialised farmers and complementary activities (e.g. composting) on these lands.

Pillar 2) Embodying a post-anthropocentric ecology of care: farming policies and practices need to be grounded in community-led and land-based initiatives, such as food-related micro-enterprises (catering, farming, etc.), community food education, community kitchens (such as Granville Community Kitchen – see box), territorial food hubs, community composting, etc. which are central the reorganisation of relations of social reproduction based on solidarities between consumers and producers, and that heal the rift between humans and nature, while creating a healthy soil scape.

Pillar 3) Building resourceful communities: such communities are able to develop, share and retain control of fundamental resources for human and planetary health. This includes appropriate investment in the type of farming infrastructure (e.g. sustainable storage, processing, transport, farm starts, etc.) which has seen systematic disinvestment in favour of industrial farming and retail models. In addition, productive housing estates are alternative types of residential neighbourhoods that incorporate dedicated farmland parcels and provide basic food-producing infrastructure to meet the needs of their residents, as well as to enable the reproduction of food, medicinal and ecological skills. Land and market access incubators are economic development hubs that co-ordinate private and public investment, planning and employment policies, and support the development of infrastructure for peri-urban farmers (see the box on Rosario).

The eighth building block – political pedagogies for urban agroecology – involves continual political education and strategising. It cuts across all three pillars, reflecting its importance.

The Granville Community Kitchen in north-west London is an example of how emerging social and urban infrastructure can heal the rift between producers and consumers and between town and country. It offers a concrete example of the role of 'landed community kitchens' in transforming the food system and neighbourhood solidarities. The kitchen operates on a number of fronts: it combines cooking and eating on site with a veggie-box scheme to meet families' needs, while at the same time organising convivial and pedagogical opportunities ranging from gardening and cooking sessions, to social dinners and political debates on a range of local and non-local issues. Food is sourced both from locally grown produce and imports from agroecological cooperatives overseas for culturally appropriate foods that cannot be grown locally. The veggie-box scheme is offered to consumers through a model that combines a community supported agriculture (CSA) approach with an equity approach. A sliding scale of box prices allows those who can pay more to contribute to an equity fund benefitting those who can only afford a lower price.

UN-Habitat could support the development of such neighbourhood infrastructure by encouraging the link between fragmented peri-urban farmlands or municipal fringe farms, and citizen-led food hubs and kitchens, to enable direct buying in the context of joined-up grassroots action re-weaving social connections for civic engagement and social justice.

BOX 1

BOX 2

Rosario: Agroecology as public policy

Starting from a social economy programme established during the 2002 financial crisis, the city of Rosario (Argentina) has demonstrated how urban public policy can be systematically leveraged to promote agroecological production within the municipal boundaries of the city as an integral part of neighbourhood development. The municipality has developed an outstanding example of **land and market access incubator** (The Rosario Agroecological Centre) by actively supporting smallholders, and granting them access to land, knowledge support, organic matter for on-farm composting, municipally produced organic fertiliser, a seed bank, and access to municipal markets for commercialising their products. By building capacity within the administration, the Centre is also questioning municipal policies and practices, and working against logics that deprive urban agroecological growers of resources and skills.

UN-Habitat could actively facilitate agroecological growing as part of efforts to build sustainable livelihoods in cities and incorporate technical and infrastructure support in neighborhood development schemes.

How can UN-Habitat champion sustainable urbanisation?

To address the contradictions and consequences of these policy divides, we make four key policy recommendations for UN-Habitat:

1. Move beyond urban centred UN policy goals and focus on the way urbanization is accommodated.

We urge UN-Habitat to move away from sectoral policy silos, and to adopt an 'urbanism' approach which recognises that urbanism is more than just the management of urban fractions, and that sustainable urban areas are underpinned by complex economic, socio-cultural and ecological relationships of mutual interdependence and care between urban and rural communities.

2. Strengthen UN-Habitat's international engagement in food system transformation, and reject food security frameworks in favour of agroecology principles

We urge UN-Habitat to engage with the simultaneous transformation of town and country by promoting urbanisation models that:

- unequivocally embrace agroecology (UN-FAO, 2008; HLPE, 2019) as the preferred model for sustainable agriculture in urban and peri-urban areas.
- adopt soil health as a new narrative for spatial planning, repositioning farming and urbanisation within a landscape ecology perspective.

3. Ensure that guidance to national planning authorities targets the cessation of farmland loss

Farmers are (land)locked between the consumption of land for urban expansion on the one hand and nature and climate goals on the other. Specific lines of action include:

- identify, within each UN-Habitat thematic working area, the multiple impacts of urbanisation on ecological resources (see Table 1) and adopt the policy directions suggested here to attempt to restore, rather than normalise, them.
- move away from unqualified 'urban density' approaches to sustainable urbanisation that normalise rural-to-urban migration and rural disinvestment. This does not mean supporting endless suburbanisation and sprawl, but instead investing in, resourcing and valuing existing and new farming communities both in peri-urban and rural areas.
- acknowledge that national carbon and biodiversity targets are often in competition with local food production within public land management decision making. Encourage local authorities to understand the ability of agroecological farming to address both simultaneously.

4. Use UN-Habitat's steering role and influence with local governments to promote political processes for achieving all eight building blocks of an agroecological urbanism.

Through its close work with international partnerships such as ICLEI, UN-Habitat could promote new political arenas for building an agroecological urbanism. This would allow actions for implementing all eight building blocks (Figure 1) to be cascaded down to local municipalities through ICLEI and other associations of municipalities.

- ensure farmers' representation and active participation within urban food strategy/partnership platforms.
- encourage public investment in infrastructure to support peri-urban farming (e.g. municipal seed banks, fertility management with organic waste, market access, food processing municipal enterprises; farmers training)
- promote the strategic use of public farmland to enable agroecological mixed farming at landscape level (to supplement the farm level). Farmers are locked up within fragmented landscape units (i.e. only access to arable land, no access to grassland or woodland, or vice versa). Rebuilding territorial linkages at landscape level and across the rural-urban divide is key for connecting farmers to nutrient sources critical for sustainable farming practices.
- encourage the adoption of the Voluntary guidance for sustainable soil management, published by the UN FAO
- develop an 'urban agroecology centre' in every city, bringing together an intersectoral team of civil servants from across directorates (planning, economy, health, waste management, public space, social economy), to support farmer training, coordinate the use of public farmland and develop agroecological agroparks.
- encourage the upgrade of municipal planning approaches, which are currently unfit for implementing national and supra-national strategic ambitions for circular economies (e.g. the EU Farm-to-Fork Strategy), particularly around agroecological re-use of organic waste.
- support the development of specific local initiatives that bring together farmers and consumers, such as community kitchens, to support socially just, feminist and decolonial food system rearticulation.
- support new farmers with economic incentives, income support programmes, or in-kind benefits (e.g. free access to tools, greenhouses, land, and markets).

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Funding

The content of this brief is based on research results from the international project "Urbanising in Place" (2018-2022), funded by the JPI-Urban Europe's "Sustainable Urban Global Initiative" (SUGI-NEXUS) programme, in collaboration with the Belmont Forum and Era-NET (Project number: 11326801). The national funders involved in supporting this project were: FWO (G0H5817N), ESRC (ES/S002251/1), Innovate UK & ERA-NET (620145 & 11326801), NWO (438-17-406), VAA (ES RTD/2018/15 and ES RTD/2018/16), Innoviris (RBC/2018-ENSUGI-1), and MINCYT (CONVE-2019-16850590-APN-DDYGD#MECCYT). The underlying data and methodological details for this study can be accessed on the project website. The programme was co-led by the authors of this brief, and involved research partners from Belgium, UK, Latvia, Netherlands, Argentina and Brazil, including university researchers, policy makers, third sector think tanks, SMEs and an intersectional group of civil society individuals and organisations, primarily engaged in farming. The project has also engaged over 350 stakeholders across the whole world through a series of webinars organised in 2021, where key research results and ideas were presented for discussion and feedback.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all project partners and the communities involved in the research project without whom these insights would not have been developed. We would also like to thank the policy brief team at CAWR, and particularly Jana Fried, Rosemary Venn and Fiona Hinchcliffe for their useful comments on earlier versions of this policy briefing (2022 and 2023). We would also like to thank the board members of JPI Urban Europe for the opportunities to discuss some of our results at UN-Habitat's event 11 # Would Urban Forum, Katowice, Poland, June 2022.

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Additional resources

For more details on the project or a more in-depth exploration of the eight building blocks of an agroecological urbanism see:

TORNAGHI Chiara, DEHAENE Michiel (eds.) (2021), *Resourcing an agroecological urbanism. Political, transformational and territorial dimensions*, London: Routledge

www.urbanisinginplace.org (project website 2018-2022)

www.agroecologicalurbanism.org a multimedia online incubator for an agroecological urbanism (first published online: February 2023)

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