

Mr. Nikola Bonchev
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Dear Mr Bonchev,

Thank you very much for your interest in and continued support for the Resnexus project. The Resnexus is happy to share relevant findings with the civil initiative for urban gardening.

Key messages:

- Urban gardening in Sofia tends to be small in size (practiced usually by individuals and households); includes a wide range of informal activities; it is intended primarily for self-consumption and driven by desire for self-sufficiency. This obscures the practice of urban gardening from policy makers at national and urban level.
- A large number of people, of different ages and social status practice urban gardening in Sofia, albeit for different purposes. The two most common reasons we encountered include: for sustenance (either as the main source of fresh and nutritional food; and/or to produce and consume ecologically “clean” food) and for recreational purposes (i.e. as a hobby, to communicate with nature, to get physical exercise).
- Urban gardening in Sofia includes a large number of people for whom urban gardening spreads over long distances, sometimes hundreds of kilometers from the physical and administrative limits of the city of Sofia.
- Urban gardening currently falls outside of national and urban agriculture, food and environmental policy. It is commonly wrongfully framed by policymakers at national and municipal level as “a hobby practiced by a small number of people”.
- Urban gardening has been and still is a key means of survival all year around for a large group of people living in Sofia. This includes not only vulnerable groups but also a large group of people who experience seasonal vulnerability such as fuel poverty.
- For some vulnerable groups, urban gardening is the only means to access fresh fruit and vegetables for most of the year.
- Urban gardening is a key practice of what is understood as “living sustainably” by showing consideration for the environment, with health and wellbeing in mind, and by offering an alternative to dominant forms of food provisioning (such as buying processed, imported and packaged food from supermarkets).

- Urban gardening has a positive effect on communities and residents which spans beyond those who garden (through the gifting and exchange of fresh produce and zimmnina).
- Supporting the practice of urban gardening would also aid other related practices such as making zimmnina, heating and using energy in the home.

The Resnexus project

The Resnexus project (2015 -2019) aims to investigate the interdependencies between food, water, energy and the environment (the “urban nexus”) in three cities: Sofia, Kampala (Uganda) and Guarulhos (Brazil). In Sofia data was collected between June and September 2017, and January and March 2018 and involved 42 observations, 54 interviews, 2 focus groups and 12 questionnaires. The urban food-water-energy-environment nexus in Sofia was studied through the interdependencies between three practices: urban gardening, making zimmnina and energy and heat use in the home. Thus, the data we have collected and the evidence that we are able to provide is in the context of the practice of urban gardening and its interdependencies with other related practices: making zimmnina and energy and heat use in the home.

Urban gardening in Sofia - a definition

There are different definitions of urban gardening, which vary according to where the activities take place and what they involve. In the case of Sofia, we defined urban gardening as *comprising all activities related to the growing of food within and near the city (from inner city allotments and community gardens to peri-urban off-ground cultivation) or have a functional relationship to it (for example, if any elements of the practice of urban gardening depends on a flow of resources and materials from the city)*. This could involve the growing of vegetables in a village 200 km away from Sofia, carried out by Sofia-based gardeners who travel regularly to and from the city to tend to the garden; process the produce from the garden in the city, and consume it there. Therefore, urban gardening in Sofia includes a large number of people for whom urban gardening spreads over long distances, sometimes hundreds of kilometers from the physical and administrative limits of the city of Sofia.

The term “gardening” rather than “agriculture” is used here, reflective of the small size, informal practices primarily intended for self-consumption. Urban gardening in the case of Sofia has a number of specific characteristics: it includes a wide range of informal activities, carried out for self-sufficiency on an individual or household level.

Urban gardening involves different spaces for cultivation, including windowsills, rooftops, balconies, building corridors, gardens, backyards, urban, peri-urban and rural allotments, spaces between blocks of apartments and alleyways, to name a few. The practice is enabled through a variety of socio-technical factors, most notable of which is the access to and availability of suitable privately owned or available for private used land in Sofia, in its peri-urban areas and in rural areas across the country. Communal and/or collective urban gardening is also increasingly gaining in popularity in the city, engaging a broad range of

communities.

Urban gardening: a hobby, a way for survival or a way of living?

We found that a large number of people, of different ages and social status practice urban gardening in Sofia, albeit for different purposes. The two most common categories of reasons for urban gardening we encountered include:

- *for sustenance*, either as the main source of fresh and nutritional food; and/or to produce and consume ecologically “clean” food. Clean food was interpreted as without any additives, chemicals or pesticides, often grown by the practitioners from carefully selected or homemade seeds and seedlings; and involving eco-friendly processes and technologies, such as drip-watering systems, rainwater collection, and composting (involving domestic waste like egg shells, pips, stones and animal waste like cow excrements);
- *for recreational purposes*, which could be defined as a hobby, to communicate with nature, to get physical exercise, etc.

Other reasons, such as the obligation to producing fruits and vegetables which taste better than what is available in supermarkets, were also frequently mentioned in both categories.

During interviews with senior and junior ministry (i.e. national) and municipal representatives it transpired that urban gardening is commonly considered “a hobby” practiced by a small number of people. This is illustrated by the following quote from a national level representative (August, 2017): [Urban gardening is] “*practiced by a handful of people who have lived outside of the country and after their return to Bulgaria are seeking to replicate a Western way of living*”. The framing of urban gardening as a hobby implies choice for urban gardeners whether to garden or not. Its framing as a practice which is not traditional to the city of Sofia and involving a small number of people was often evoked as a justification for the lack of definition, regulation or strategy for urban gardening in the city.

However, we found that the only a small number of people practicing urban gardening were driven purely by interest as a hobby, for recreational purposes. The majority of gardeners that we encountered (over 80) were in fact practicing urban gardening as a way of living (part of a wider set of sustainable and healthy living practices) and as a way of survival (means of getting food and fresh food for most of the year, not only for vulnerable groups such as low-incomes, heavy caring responsibilities or any disabilities but also for a large group of people who experience seasonal vulnerability such as fuel poverty). For some vulnerable participants, urban gardening is the only means to get fresh fruit and vegetables for most of the year.

The role of urban gardening in sustenance for vulnerable people should be understood in relation to another similar, informal practice: that of making zimnina. We found that for many vulnerable people practices of making zimnina are inherently linked to practices of urban gardening. Specifically, we found that making zimnina is an important way to redistribute food through the winter. Those suffering from fuel poverty will often survive through the winter months by eating and cooking zimnina which they make during in the summer and autumn from what they grow in their gardens. In fact, the only way many vulnerable people are

able to make zimnina is if they are also able to grow their own fruits and vegetables. This is illustrated in the following quote from one of the study participants “Зимнината е първо начин, ако имаш продукти от градината да ги употребиш, ако не можеш да ги изядеш навенъж” (A, 42). Another participant in the study, a 86-year old pensioner, C would spend 4 days a week living in a small cottage in her garden in the outskirts of Sofia between April and September to make sure she grows enough produce to make into zimnina for the winter. Furthermore, urban gardening affects and benefits a yet greater number of people as produce is often gifted, given away to and exchanged with family, friends and those in need, either fresh or in the form of zimnina.

Policy for urban gardening: key considerations and recommendation

Small scale, informal urban gardening is excluded from national and urban agriculture, food and environmental policy, and mistakenly treated by many policymakers as a hobby. This has translated into almost complete lack of institutional support for the practice of urban gardening. At the time of writing, urban gardening does not have an official definition and it does not appear in any official documents, policy or law.

As an issue, urban gardening is also siloed into considerations about green spaces in Sofia and excluded from discussions about food production, vulnerability or (fuel) poverty. Recognition of the linkages of urban gardening with environmental protection, air pollution and climate change are also limited and ad hoc and tend to be linked to grassroots initiatives such as “Civil initiative for Urban Gardening”, “Gradina za Drujba” and “Solidarity Garden”. However, such initiatives are the exception, rather than the rule and have received limited attention and support from Sofia Municipality. This policy blindness to the significance of urban gardening threatens a key coping mechanism for many in the city living in seasonal or permanent vulnerability and presents a missed opportunity for building individual, community and system resilience in Sofia.

In developing an official definition of urban gardening and considering support for the practice it is important for policy makers and planners at municipal and national level to recognize that urban gardening is a hobby to some as well as a way of living and survival for many others. This means that charging rent or a fee for land use for the purposes of urban gardening (at a communal or individual basis) will rob those who are most vulnerable from an important coping mechanism against vulnerability.

On the basis of our findings we strongly recommend that the urban gardening is treated as a wide spread practice of sustenance, as well as recreation and considered as one bottom-up way to introduce nexus thinking about the interdependencies of water, food, energy and the environment in the capital city. As such, it should benefit from a cross-departmental support from Sofia Municipality and be part of a wider package of incentives and measures on green economy, sustainability and wellbeing.

Unfortunately, we are unable to present evidence that directly speaks to the educational effects of urban gardening on children; the impact of urban gardening on soil preservation and the use of environmentally friendly technologies, as these were not included in our study.

The Resnexus team will be happy to assist you further with providing more evidence or responding to specific questions, in person or in writing. Please do not hesitate to get in touch in such instance.

Yours sincerely,

R. Hiteva

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ДО доктор Ралица Хитева
изследовател в научноизследователски проект
„RESnexus: Resilience and vulnerability at the urban Nexus“

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Относно: Научни данни за влиянието на градското земеделие върху градската зелена система, и градските общности

Уважаема доктор Ралица Хитева,

Екипът на инициатива за градско градинарство е запознат с работата Ви по проект „Resilience and vulnerability at the urban Nexus“ и следим с интерес публикуваните в интернет страницата на проекта новини и резултати.

Смятаме за много ценни изводите ви за положителното влияние на градското земеделие върху социалното сближаване, физическото и психическо здраве на практикуващите градско градинарство, както и запазването на здравето на градските почви, съхраняването на традиционни сортове и прилагането на екологосъобразни земеделски технологии. Напълно сме съгласни и с изводите ви за образователните ефекти от градското земеделие и неговия принос за развиването на по-отговорни модели на потребление и про-екологично поведение при децата.

През последните месеци екипът на инициатива „Градина заДружба“ разработва предложение, което ще внесем за обсъждане в Столичния общински съвет (СОС) за определяне на терена, върху който функционира градината като предназначен единствено за градско земеделие и за отдаването му безплатно за такава дейност. За целта набираме експертни становища от специалисти в различни научни полета и от различни научни институции в България и чужбина, с които да аргументираме социалната, образователна и екологична значимост на градското земеделие пред СОС.

Обръщам се към Вас с молба за изготвянето на такова становище на базата на резултатите от изследването Ви до момента.

На разположение съм по всяко време в случай, че имате нужда от допълнителна информация по молбата ми.

В очакване на обратна връзка от Вас

С уважение,
Никола Бончев
гр. София
31.10.2018