

THE ROLE OF URBANITES IN SUSTAINING URBAN AGRICULTURE:  
A CASE STUDY OF SHANGHAI

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ABSTRACT

Urban agriculture has been raised as a strategy to cope with urban challenges in both the industrialized and the developing world under the global wave of sustainable development. In developing countries, urban agriculture is usually for pro-subsistent purposes, while in developed countries, it is more pro-recreational. Urban agriculture in China has both the two features. Meanwhile, the rapid development of cities has brought up many challenges impeding the sustainability of urban agriculture. Shanghai, as one of the largest cities and economic centers in China, has witnessed the most typical challenges facing urban agriculture, which includes decrease in agriculture population, income gap between agriculture households and non-agriculture households, farmland decrease, agriculture pollution and food safety as the major issues.

Previous studies have been focusing mainly on the above mentioned challenges especially from the stance of producers and policy makers. However, with increasing market demand for cultural and spiritual needs from urban agriculture, this study aims to describe the role of urbanites in sustaining urban agriculture by analyzing the different patterns of urbanites involvement in urban agriculture, thus providing policy implications for sustaining urban agriculture.

Qingpu, an important agriculture district in Shanghai Municipality has been chosen as a case study for this research. By identifying the patterns of urbanite involvement through

interview survey to key informants, this study discusses the potentials and limitations in sustaining urban agriculture through urbanite involvements. Questionnaire survey has been conducted to a target group ranging from the 20s to the 60s, with the 30s to 40s as the majority, in the district center of the study area to identify the factors influencing different patterns of involvement as well as the geographic and demographic distribution. Combined with policy review, implications are provided from the study to sustain urban agriculture in Shanghai. The framework proposed by this study can be replicated to capture the social phenomenon of urbanite involvement in urban agriculture in cities with different sizes of population or economic development levels. Studies can also be conducted with the same case over different periods to capture the chronological changes of such a phenomenon.

Two major patterns of urbanite involvement in urban agriculture, recreational involvement and farming involvement, have been discovered. It is estimated that more than two-thirds of the target group have been involved in urban agriculture for recreational on-farm activities, including harvest experience and restaurant services. Around 10% of the targeted urban population are involved in farming activities for self-consumption or for business. Both of the two patterns of involvement can address the challenges of agriculture pollution, income gap between agriculture household and non-agriculture household as well as the food safety issues, but cannot address the farmland decrease issue. Urbanite involvement in farming activities can also provide possible solutions for the labor shortage issue facing urban agriculture.

For the factors influencing urbanite involvement in urban agriculture, it can be inferred from the questionnaire result that urbanites who are interested in all types of agro-activities are those younger in age, having agriculture background or gardening habits, which can serve as criteria for the farmland transfer system when selecting successful bidders for farm or farmland management. Those people also tend to appreciate more the cultural and other values embedded in urban agriculture, while showing more concern towards the cultivation

methods, which is an important factor for addressing the agriculture pollution and food safety issues in Shanghai. Results have also shown that with more frequent involvement of urbanites in agro-activities, more efficient information exchange on agro-products is possible, since those frequently involved tend to purchase their products directly through producers more often.

For the spatial distribution of different agro-activities, generally relations or connections based on kinship or friendship are always important factors for urbanites to get involved in urban agriculture. To be specific, harvest experiences are preferred in places either further away from downtown areas, or having specific agro-products. While eat-on-farm experiences are generally preferred in places close to residence. Since the observations of farming activities are rare, it is hard to generate other features apart from kinship or friendship connections.

With limited reported observations of public perspectives on sustainable urban agriculture, it can be inferred with cautiousness that food safety is a major concern among urbanites, along with concerns towards the agricultural environment protection. Institutional changes such as introducing better monitoring mechanisms might be needed for better urban agriculture management.

*Key words:* Urban agriculture, Urbanite involvement, Sustainability, Shanghai