European research on urban allotment gardens
Example of a joint project between Sevilla (Spain) and Paris (France)

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THE COST NETWORK

> COST is the longest-running European framework supporting trans-national cooperation among researchers, engineers and scholars across Europe.
COST ACTION TU1201: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS

- 2013-2016
- Chair and Vice Chair of the Action: Ms Runrid FOX-KÄMPER (DE) and Prof Simon BELL (EE)
- Mission:
  > comprehend and manage the relevance of allotment gardens in political, social, ecological and urban design aspects within the urban context of European Cities
  > by creating an interdisciplinary network
  > and by the identification of practices supportive for the management of allotment gardens within urban planning processes
- Objectives:
  - to study ...

The mission is to fully comprehend and manage the relevance of Allotment Gardens in political, social, ecological and urban design aspects within the urban context of European Cities by creating an interdisciplinary network to foster the multidimensional aspects of knowledge about Allotment Gardens and by the identification of practices supportive for the management of Allotment Gardens within urban planning processes.
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• 105 participants from 31 countries
• Researchers, local authorities, non-profit organizations
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Core group meetings
- Conferences (by local authorities and participants)
- 4 working groups
- Visits: the diversity of urban allotment gardens across Europe

Working Group 1 Policy and Urban Development
Chairs
Dr Nazila KESHAVARZ
Prof Matthias DRILLING

Working Group 2 Sociology
Chairs
Dr Mary BENSON
Prof Johan BARSTAD
Susan Noori

Working Group 3 Ecology
Chairs
Dr Annette VOIGT
Prof Andrzej MIZGAJSKI

Working Group 4 Urban Design
Chairs
Dr Silvio CAPUTO
Ms Sandra COSTA BAPTISTA
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- Outcomes
COST ACTION TU1201: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS

- Encouraging young researchers to investigate on the topic of urban allotment gardens
  - Training schools
  - Short Term Scientific Mission

STSM are missions or exchange visits by young researchers aimed at strengthening the existing scientific networks within the Actions by allowing researchers to visit an institution or laboratory in another COST country.
I was given the opportunity to be funded for a short term scientific mission for 3 months in Sevilla in spring 2015. Together with Raul Puente, who was the supervisor of the mission during my stay in Sevilla, we proposed to the COST Action to work on the topic of the presence and role of urban gardens in the city in crisis. The starting point of this project was the economic crisis of 2008, as at that time the global market experienced what is considered by some as the « worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s ». You see on the screen the front cover of the Time Magazine of October 2008, it shows a picture of a depression-era soup kitchen, in reminiscence of the 1929 banking crisis. This crisis of the banking sector has become a global economic and social crisis that led most western countries to recession. However, not all national economies experienced the crisis in a similar way. The southern part of Europe has suffered the consequences of this economic crisis more intensely and Spain, in particular, has suffered a lot, because the economic crisis hit the country in the peak of economic prosperity in terms of GDP growth and employment creation, which was driven mainly by the construction sector and related industries and services.
**STSM: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN THE CITY IN CRISIS**

- Consequences of the economic crisis
  - On urban landscapes
    - Vacant lots and buildings
    - Unfinished construction works
  - On individuals
    - Material conditions of living: loss of financial means
    - Immaterial aspects: well-being, health, maintenance of traditional habits
    - Food insecurity, alteration of access to quality food and food patterns of households

There has been various consequences of this crisis on the Spanish economy. One of them is the sudden slowdown of the construction industry, which left many construction works unfinished and vacant buildings. The rate of unemployment rose dramatically and several research studies have shown that the crisis has affected both the material conditions of living of individuals and immaterial aspects such as well-being, health or maintenance of traditional habits.

The loss of financial means at the scale of a household can also directly threaten the access to food: we know that income is the first determinant of diet. This is especially true for fresh products, which can rapidly become a lower-priority in household budgets and turn inaccessible to the most vulnerable. In several countries of southern Europe, there are converging signs of an alteration of access to quality food and food patterns of households as an indirect consequence of the economic crisis.
STSM: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN THE CITY IN CRISIS

> Urban gardens, a response to the crisis?

In this context many associations have made the link between the growing interest for urban gardening in southern Europe and the direct and indirect effects of the crisis. They state that urban gardens are “anti-crisis remedies”.

You can see on the screen a few newspaper articles that show enthusiasm for urban gardens with respect to the context of economic crisis. This one says “Kitchen gardens grow in Europe to save money on the markets”, the second “Social gardens: little green treasures in times of crisis”, and the last one “citizen garden, between leisure and necessity”. Of course, there are only examples and you find plenty of this type of articles in the press.

But truly, very little research has been conducted first to understand the relation between the dynamics of creation of urban gardens and the economic crisis and secondly to assess the benefits derived from urban gardens that could contribute to alleviate the effects of the economic crisis that has been affecting European countries.
STSM: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN THE CITY IN CRISIS

Objectives

> Understand the dynamics that led to the growing phenomenon of urban gardens in Sevilla and how the economic crisis affects or not this dynamics

> Understand if and how urban gardens contribute to household resilience (food production) in the context of the economic crisis

So, an objective of the STSM was to contribute to understand the dynamics around the creation of gardens in Sevilla and also to understand how the economic crisis affects or not this dynamics.

A second objective was to understand if and how urban gardens contribute to household resilience (food production) in the context of the economic crisis -> a little bit too ambitious for the 3 months of my mission, but...
STSM: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN THE CITY IN CRISIS

So first of all some figures about urban gardens in Sevilla: the first urban allotment garden was created in 1992 and it was actually the first urban allotment garden of Spain. He was created from a social demand of inhabitants of the northern district of Sevilla. This first garden was a basic experience which served as a model for the other gardens created later. Since this first experience, 10 other gardens have been created.
We identified three different processes directly or indirectly related to the economic crisis, and which impact the dynamics of creation and functioning of urban gardens in Sevilla:
  - The varying implication of public institutions,
  - An evolution in gardener’s profile and motivations,
  - A change in the objectives assigned to the projects of urban gardening, which leads to a diversification of the types of initiatives.
I’m going to detail a little bit these three processes.
Almost all gardens in Sevilla were born from grass-root movements. Two public institutions have occasionally been involved in supporting and promoting urban gardening for the past 10 years in Sevilla:
- the City Council
- the government of Andalucía, more recently.
The interesting point is that government of Andalucía came to urban gardens in great part as a direct consequence of the economic crisis: as the public land owned by the region lost its value during the crisis, they couldn’t keep on developing only new constructions, they had to find an other use for this land: one of the solution they find is to open an allotment gardens site.
Regarding gardeners’ profile, interviews with local show that there is an evolution in the profile of gardeners. While urban gardeners were previously mostly retired people gardening for leisure and social contacts, more and more young and unemployed people appeared on the lists to access a garden.
More unemployed people appear on the lists to access a garden.

> 393 applicants to the Parque del Alamillo:
- 185 working status not mentioned,
- When mentioned:
  - 42% employed,
  - 38% unemployed
  - 10% students or minor
  - 10% retired

It seems that there are also more unemployed people than before gardening or waiting to access a plot.
Regarding the motivations of gardeners, they are very diverse of course. This is a graph that shows you the motivation expressed by gardeners in the application file they sent to the region Andalucia to apply precisely for a plot in this new garden created after the crisis.

For example, the motivations most often mentioned by applicants was food production, with respect to the quality of products, the possibility to save money, the possibility to improve’s one diet, etc. Then came the educational aspects, where garden is seen as a mean to teach and learn things, then the garden as a social place, etc.

I’m not going to describe all of them, I wanted to focus on the ones that are described by gardeners in relation with the crisis.
First, food production in the gardens is sometimes described as a way to save money, this is a very direct, immediately understandable link to the effect of the crisis on individuals.
Other motivations have a more indirect link with the crisis: they relate to the social transformation the economic crisis has induced. I identified two different trends in the “speech” of gardeners that may seem contradictory, but rather join in the garden:

- First, many gardeners describe the garden as a mean to strengthen the family and to transmit traditional values to the youngest. They refer in many cases to an idealized vision of the past life in the countryside. In some cases, gardening is even described as having inherent moral value.

I interpret this as a quest for “safe haven” values, and a tendency to withdraw into the family unit, with aspirations to be more independent of the stir of the society. In this vision of the garden, it is described as a “healthy place” for family life, enabling to produce its own food in a search for self-sufficiency.
Experimenting new models of social organizations
The garden is a “small world” where to put in practice new models of social organization in response to a social and economic model considered as non sustainable: building a community based on knowledge and know-how exchange, demonstrating “alternative ways” to agro-food systems.

- Another set of motivations, which partly overlap the ones I just described, relates to a will to experiment new models of social organization, in response to a social and economic model considered as non sustainable. Gardeners describe a will to build a new society, and the garden is seen as a “small world”, where to put in practice this new organization. This implies sharing knowledge, working in group, building a local community centred on the garden, in an explicit attempt to show that “alternative ways” to agro-food systems or to the capitalist economy are viable.
Last point on the dynamics of urban agriculture in Sevilla: we observe a diversification of the types of urban gardens. Beside urban allotment gardens, a number of entrepreneurial projects have emerged in Seville since the beginning of 2010’s. Sometimes, these projects are led by organizations that previously had direct or indirect experiences in creation and management of urban gardens. They differ significantly from existing urban gardens regarding several aspects, the most important being their objectives as they aim at creating jobs and wages.
Part of the dynamics surrounding urban gardens in Sevilla can be explained within the context of the economic crisis:

- Decline in the value of the land + vacant lots
- Changes in Public authorities' perception and actions

But not all of it:

- before 2008 it already existed in Sevilla a strong dynamic of creation of gardens
- Societal expectations
STSM: URBAN ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN THE CITY IN CRISIS

• Motivations of gardeners have changed...
• But haven’t turned massively towards producing food and saving money

In urban gardens, the most visible impacts of the economic crisis on gardeners’ motivations are linked to its underlying effects, like causing a lack of confidence in the capacity of the actual society and economical model to provide good living conditions.

With respect to the profile and motivations of urban gardeners, the crisis also had an effect: however, the motivations of gardeners have not turned abruptly towards producing food and saving money, as this is sometimes recounted in press articles.
AUPA PROJECT: NEW FORMS OF URBAN AGRICULTURE FOR ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND JOBS

- Started 01/2016
- Collaboration between the Urban Agriculture Team at the I3F Chair at AgroParisTech (Paris, France) and the Pablo de Olavide University (Sevilla, Spain)

Following the STSM: now that we knew the dynamics of creation of gardens in Sevilla, we thought there was much left to know on how urban gardens actually helped people affected by the crisis. Started in January...
What do we mean by new forms of urban agriculture?

First, urban agriculture...

New forms:
Of course, urban gardens may have a lot of different functions for people affected by an economic crisis: there are therapeutic effects in gardening, a lot of things to say also on the social integration of isolated people through gardens... But in this project, we decided to focus on two things: how the new forms of urban agriculture that emerged for the past years in Sevilla and Paris provide food or jobs to people involved in it.
AUPA PROJECT: NEW FORMS OF URBAN AGRICULTURE FOR ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND JOBS

- Specific question on gardening and access to food: to which extent and how do urban gardens contribute to household food supply in social housing neighborhoods?
  - What share of gardeners’ total fruits and vegetables consumption is grown in the garden (vs produce that are bought)?
  - Who benefits from urban allotment gardens?
  - Do food insecure gardeners have different strategies / grow different products than food secure gardeners?
- Gardens, places of learning?

We already expect to find a huge variability in the results, and we know that there might be a variety of explanation to this variability.

So, we will look at different aspects of food production in the gardens: the quantities of fruits and vegetables harvested, but also the diversity of products, who are the beneficiaries of the garden products (it’s usually the family of the gardener or his friend, but he might give a more or less important part of his harvest), how the products are grown, that is to say, what are the cropping practices of gardeners? Talking about these cropping practices, comes the question of knowledge: do newcomers (younger) know how to garden? Question about the competences of new gardeners, and how they can be trained: are gardens places of training? It’s one of our hypothesis, especially in Sevilla because we saw that urban agriculture business projects are sometimes launched by people who were previously gardeners and decided to try to make a living from what they grew.

What are the best ways to train this people? Give workshops, encourage informal discussions and exchanges between different generations of gardeners, oblige newcomers to garden during one or two years in a communal plot?

We also know that growing vegetables is one thing, cooking is another. So, many non-profit organization work on the two aspects to order to use the garden as a real development tool with respect to nutrition and food issues.
AUPA PROJECT: NEW FORMS OF URBAN AGRICULTURE FOR ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE FOOD AND JOBS

- AUPA Toolbox:
  - Interviews with gardeners
  - Observations of practices
  - The harvest booklet
    > Individual weekly monitoring of volunteers
    > Workshops every two months with event
  - The purchase booklet
    > Cashier’s receipt or estimation by the gardener
Thank you for your attention!