

# CITY FOOD POLICIES



Preserving edible landscape © Risteco

## Moving towards a possible synergy between urban and rural territories.

**Author: Isabelle Lacourt**

### Urban versus rural...

According to the “Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) reporting categories system (2), urban areas correspond to «built environments with a high human density» whereas all what is not urban can be divided into nine other different categories ranging from marine, coastal, inland water, forest, dryland, island, mountain, polar and cultivated categories. This last one mostly corresponds to the so called rural area: « lands dominated by domesticated plant species, used for and substantially changed by crop, agroforestry or aquaculture production». Both rural - cultivated, and urban areas are strongly influenced by more or less dense human settlements. The MEA system describes boundary limits as following. Cultivated areas are characterized as «areas in which at least 30% of the landscape comes under cultivation in any particular year; includes orchards, agroforestry and integrated agriculture-aquaculture systems» whereas urban areas are described as «known human settlements with a population of 5000 or more, with boundaries delineated by observing persistent night-time lights [...]». Despite such

definitions, urban and rural characteristics may overlap in the peri-urban areas where it is not always easy to make clear distinctions. Moreover, similar levels of population density and empty spaces may also characterize different living situations. Likewise, patterns of spatial distribution are evolving and look less and less like concentric circles enlarging from high density poles, to become more similar to a network of poles connected together and attracting people and businesses.

Indeed territorial development is driven by attractiveness and capacity to generate revenues, either productive (goods and services), social (public services such as schools hospitals or administrations) or residential (dormitory towns). Cities compete together and struggle over neighbouring areas to affirm their supremacy and richness. And where they are gradually expanding, worldwide, rural exodus accelerate the decline of farming.

Enforcement mechanisms exist to contrast the effects of a rapid liberalization of land-use planning. For instance, the principle of territorial equality that targets equal services for the population, such as mobility, is consistently applied in France where it has allowed to shape population distribution throughout the national territory. Today, such principle is challenged because it is responsible of the extension of peri-urban bed communities in rural areas. Moreover, to set up more or less tight protective barriers to safeguard rural spaces and their increasingly fragile resources, could result in artificially resilient “rural ghettos” which becomes too

expensive to maintain in a context of economic crisis and public budget cuts. The idea to allow permeability between urban and rural territories by working on innovative governance systems is taking root. It rests on the possibility to create and regulate solidarity mechanisms, by promoting cohesion and coherence between well- differentiated territories in order to allow these different spaces to collaborate and meet respectively common challenges (Table 1).

**Table 1: The complexity of school canteens management in the city of Paris.**

<b>URBAN AND RURAL COMMON CHALLENGES</b>
Services to the population
Landscape maintenance
Land management
People and goods mobility

### To reduce the gap...

Several factors might contribute to reduce the gap between urban and rural attractiveness. Among them, the deep environmental crisis urging our globalized societies to escape from the logic of industrialized systems based on non-renewable resources and energy, is not the least as it undermines the autonomy capacity of urban more than rural spaces.

Indeed, until the assessment of territory has been based, beyond reasonable doubt, on economic assets related to financial and technological development, urban ecosystems have been considered as more attractive than rural ones. Shifting assessment towards a more holistic human well-being, constituted by secure, healthy living conditions, sufficient earnings for basic needs and possibility to get good social relations, allow to re-evaluate positively rural areas. The increasingly vulnerable ecosystems lead to a growing understanding of many benefits or ecosystem services (2), which were ignored until now. They include products, such as food, renewable / non-renewable energy, fiber, fresh water etc., regulating services, such as climate, flood and drought regulations, land degradation etc., supporting services such as nutrient cycling or soil formation and cultural services such as recreational, spiritual, religious and non-material

benefits. Listing of all rural and urban services, (see table 2) including ecosystem services, allows to show the differences and the possible complementarity of urban and rural areas.

**Table 2: comparison of main productive resources in rural and urban areas.**

<b>RURAL AREAS</b>
<b>Main productive resources</b>
food (primary production) energy Landscape water nature goods (ex. biodiversity)
Regenerating context : contact with Nature and open spaces

<b>URBAN AREAS</b>
<b>Main productive resources</b>
Superior services (ex. health, academics, research etc.) Engineering Culture Inter-modality and worldwide connections
Stimulating context : contact with people

### City food policies could make a difference...

Food has not been usually considered among the competences of a city for many reasons among which: food is mainly produced out of the cities and the latter are not directly implied in food production; authorities consider that citizens are mostly able to exercise their free will in choosing their own food habits; negative externalities related to environment or health are not perceived as a whole and therefore are underestimated or ignored; food is not seen as a modern factor of innovation able to foster and shape the future of urban settlements, but as a trivial commodity to be provided by an efficient global supply system; finally food issues are too

often diluted between the different aspects related to health, nutrition, environment, production, public food services or local economy, all being treated separately in a counterproductive systematic approach. But decision makers are caught up by the early intuitions of pioneers and are urgently asked to put on agenda the question of city food policies, working together with people communities and associations, as well as researchers and also companies, in a creative social space to design and experience new solutions bringing significant improvement to the overall quality of life. It is also becoming increasingly evident that city food policies will not bring satisfying results unless they are integrated with broader territorial management policies facing the question of horizontal solidarity between rural and urban areas at a local/regional level and in the same time at a global/ multicultural/ intercontinental level.

As consumer society is under attack, healthy clean and low processed food appears as one of the few goods to remain fully legitimated by a daily consumption, because it is a vital need for everyone. Today, a flourishing context of innovative practices related to agriculture diversification, rural tourism, and local food supply to promote food quality is echoed in the growing number of urban agriculture projects thus creating unexpected bridges to help mutual recognition and direct links between food producers and consumers, indistinctly in urban and rural communities. However, before to create a groundswell around the evidence that a city

eats, it eats food, but also it consumes the land needed to produce it, food has to become a new pillar of urban management which is far to be the case today. This eye-opener gives a glimpse on new scenarios of cooperation occurring worldwide between urban and rural areas, in which the declared ambition of countryside is not anymore to become a residential area attracting redundant urban activities and people but rather to reinforce innovative and traditional activities such as agriculture and tourism as products and services able to improve the quality of life in urban and rural settlements in a logic of symbiosis, based on fair exchanges. This flourishing context around urban/rural food issues is reminiscent with the phenomenon of Living Labs and open and user-innovation, gathering public and private actors in an interdisciplinary approach, « to generate innovative improvements and novel solutions to real-world problems» (3).

### **Bibliography:**

(2) Ecosystems and Human Well-being: a framework for Assessment. (2003) chapter 2 Ecosystems and Their Services. <http://www.unep.org/maweb/en/Reports.aspx>

(3) Living Labs, (2012) "Technology Innovation Management Review". <http://timreview.ca/issue/2012/september>.