

PARTICIPATIVE URBAN FARMING

Report of field visit by IPES-Food Team, Brussels, 2 June 2018

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Pictures by Yan Hairong and Bina Agarwal

On Saturday 2 June 2018, a group of us from IPES-Food visited an impressive collective farm in the heart of the garden city of Le Logis-Floreal in Brussels. Run as a non-profit organisation, La Ferme du Chant des Cailles, and a cooperative, La Cooperative du Chant des Cailles, vegetable and fruit farming is being done on a piece of land which had earlier lain fallow, surrounded by social housing. A short distance away is a sheep farm and apple orchard also being managed by these organisations.

Created in 2012, La Ferme du Chant des Cailles is an agroecological, professional farm which grew out of a participatory project for promoting sustainable food and bio-intensive urban agriculture. The Farm was developed on 2.4 ha of vacant field provided by Le Logis-Floreal. Located 400 m from the first field are 2 hectares of pastures and orchards. In addition, there are three spaces with a social corner shop, a collective chicken house near the Farm, and meadows in a nature reserve.

These pieces of land are used for two citizen's projects and three professional farms.

- **Citizens garden:** These are shared vegetable gardens managed by the neighbourhood households, along with a neighborhood compost area.
- **Citizens activities:** Public spirited social and educational activities are also organised to create a sustainable neighbourhood. These include running the social corner shop and chicken house, an open air cinema, and holding parties and debates.
- **A professional vegetable market garden:** This has 0.95 ha cultivated using bio-intensive with no tillage and managed by 3 professional gardeners and a few volunteers. It is 100% community supported agriculture (CSA). It has 310 members who pay an annual subscription which covers costs, including the emoluments of the market gardeners. The subscribers pick their own vegetables directly from the field. A part of the land is used to grow flowers which people can pick and pay for.
- **A professional sheep farm managed by shepherds,** with 45 sheep. They produce cheese, yoghurt, ice cream, knitted yarn and meat. The yarn and meat are sold. Lambs can graze on 0.70 ha. In addition there is an old apple orchard on 2 ha. Apples are sold as fruit as is apple juice produced on the farm. The sales are partly done directly from the farm and partly via CSA groups in Brussels
- **Professional medicinal and herbal garden.** In an area of 0.09 ha, wild plants and edible flowers are grown and sold. Workshops are also held for adults and children on the use of herbal and medicinal plants in daily life.

For irrigation, they undertake rainwater harvesting and when we visited they had 24000 litres for 3 weeks. Educational activities are also held by citizens (supported by the professional

farmers on technical issues), to raise awareness of sustainable food and sustainable agriculture among adults and children.

This model of community supported agriculture is based on participative governance which aims at sustainability and enhancing social cohesion and resilience in the community.

he initial idea for this innovative urban agriculture project came from Magda, a woman living in the neighbourhood. Noticing available fallow land she contacted a non-profit organisation working on urban agriculture to see if there were people interested in farming the land. A small group of motivated citizens and professional farmers carried the idea forward and obtained the land from the owner—Le Logis-Floreal—a private cooperative society for social housing (a Real Estate Company of Public Service) accredited and controlled by the Housing Society of Brussels. As explained by Ann De Gheest, a 40 year old very dynamic professional farmer, who has been involved in this project from the start:

“After our agreement we invited the neighbours to think together about the kind of farm they would like for their neighbourhood. From those roots the urban farming project was born.

They don’t charge us rent for the land, but we provide services to the neighbourhood. There is an open space between the cultivated plots which has garden chairs and a swing where people can come and relax. After discussing with the neighbours we decided to cultivate the open space collectively in two ways: by creating citizens’ farms and professional farms.”

The Citizens’ Farms

There are 70 citizen gardeners who have divided the open land into 20 small subgroups to grow vegetables and flowers. Initially all groups received equal plots with clean lines, but this was later changed and made more flexible.

One of the citizens, Marie-Noelle, took us to her plot. Their group has 9 persons. The plot is 6 m x 1 m. She told us: “We wanted mixed crops: legumes, fruits and herbs and did not want to work the soil too much before planting. We meet in winter to plan the field. It is not easy, since we only come on weekends. It involves much more work than we had anticipated. We make a nursery at home. We all work on a Sunday so each of us puts in the same labour. We have a lot of flexibility in how we work. We work on all parts of the plot together and divide the output equally. ‘There is no stress’. People from all the plots meet once a month. Some 20-30 people come.”

Each citizens’ group has its own rules for sharing the land. In some cases 5-6 persons jointly cultivate a plot. In others, they subdivide it. For example, in a 15 x 10 m plot shared by 10 persons, each person has a row of land on which they plant what they want. Although they have subdivided their plot into individual parts, they all meet and eat together weekly. We asked them if they ever faced conflicts. “Yes we do sometimes disagree on matters of policy, such as whether or not we should kill the slugs, but not on any major issue.”

There are also several Moroccan immigrant families whom the NGO has helped settle and integrate with the community, by involving them in citizens’ farming. Those who want to join the community for farming can come on a Sunday to their meeting to ask for a plot, if available. They have to pay €10/year.



A plot in the citizens' garden.

Picture by Yan Hairong

The Professional farms

(i) The market garden

There are three professional farmers—two women and a man—managing the market garden. They grow mainly vegetables and fruits with flowers on the side. People buy an annual subscription for the right to harvest the produce. At present there are 310 members in the CSA. They have a dual pricing system and cross-subsidise the less well-off. As Ann explained:

We need to get the average price of €345/adult, but members can pay up to €400/adult/year to allow other people with financial difficulties to pay less, starting at €295. Children are charged €19 x age. The subscribers can pick vegetables all year round. We don't ask them to show their baskets to us. We explain the CSA concepts to them and base it on trust."

We use flags to tell subscribers if the produce is ripe. Rows without a flag means the produce is not ready for harvesting. A green flag indicates it is fresh and can be harvested in portions needed for family subsistence. A red flag means they must harvest immediately and can take as much as they want. We don't sell our produce to non-subscribers; all of it is for members.

We also have a self-picking flower garden. We charge a price per flower and people leave their money in a basket. We don't keep watch. Some do cheat, but employing someone to keep watch would be more expensive than the small losses we suffer due to non-payments. We charge 70 cents per tulip, for example, and earn a fair amount. This year we had 45,000 tulips. We added flowers in our market garden since it is so lucrative.

To join the self picking system, people have to live within a 3 ½ km radius. To join the citizens' garden they have to live within a 1 ½ km radius. The subscription fee pays for everything, including labour.

The members contribute some labour. One day per month is designated as a collective working day and everyone is supposed to contribute at least one day per year. In addition there are four volunteers who come one day/week, and one or two trainees who come for 2 to 3 days/week. They are not paid but they learn. Two market gardeners work for 4 to 5 days per week, the third works for 2 to 3 days per week.

As Ann explained:

“We count our hours and then divide. The average pay for professional farmers is €8/hr in small farms. Earlier we were getting €7-8 per hour, but it was not enough. We found it difficult to cope. So we discussed this with the members and they agreed to raise our pay. Since last year we pay ourselves €17/hour. We also have two paid seasonal workers. Each works for two days/week from April to September.”

We began as a non-profit, but it was not really suited for our activity. We needed an economic structure that could allow us to share costs with other professional farmers on our farm. We also wanted the neighbourhood to invest. So we became a cooperative created by all 6 professional producers (3 on the market gardens, 2 on the sheep farm, and 1 on the medicinal herb farm) and 1 citizen. Now we have 155 shareholders. Most live in the neighbourhood, some are active on the farm, others are members of the market gardens or customers of the sheep farm, or simply supporters of the cooperative. Each year the financial balance is shared with the members in a general body meeting. We also vote if big organisational changes are planned. Tactical decisions are made by the board (the 6 producers and 3 citizens), while operational decisions in the field are made by the producers.”

The cooperative was formed in December 2016 and includes the market garden, sheep farm and medicinal herb farm. All the material, green houses etc. were sold to the cooperative. A capital of €40.000 was needed to buy the material for the 3 projects. The cost of each share was €100. A person could buy a maximum of 50 shares. But each shareholder has one vote. Buying shares makes the person a co-owner but that does not give them automatic right to the produce. They don't give dividends. The profits are invested back but a 5% bonus is allowed. People accept the terms since they know it is for a social purpose.



Ann & Antoine Picture by Bina Agarwal



Market Garden Picture by Yan Hairong

(ii) The sheep farm and orchard

Two ha of land belonging to a nearby convent are used for the sheep farm and orchard. No rent is charged but they have to take care of the entire area. They produce milk, cheese, yogurt and buttermilk but not wool which is not profitable. They allow the shearer to keep the wool in lieu of part of his pay.

As Antoine Sterling (the shepherd) described their work:

We get 72 lambs a year and sell them. We use organic methods to rear the sheep. Lambs stay with the mother for 45 days. We feed them cereals and green fodder after that. The sheep give milk and lambs for 5 years. We milk them from March to end-Oct. We graze in season, and buy cereal to supplement their feed. An average life of a sheep is 12 years. However, we allow eco-pasture to older sheep and let them graze in the city to give them a second life. When they give no milk, they graze. We don't sell them, but we rent them to people who want them to graze their gardens. Now we also give some to the slaughter house.

We don't sell milk. Instead we make a special soft cheese, 80% of which goes directly to the customer. We have market sales on Sunday. In addition we have an apple orchard first planted in 1920. We planted new trees in 2014-16. Even old trees give fruit. We also make jam, sweets, fruit juice, etc.



Sheep farm

Picture by Bina Agarwal

Till last year we were paid €8 per hour for all our work as shepherds, and on the apple orchard and eco-pasture. This year it was raised to € 17/ hr making it equal to that of the market gardeners. This increase is partly due to our better production and higher product prices and partly thanks to the solidarity expressed by the market gardeners towards the shepherds. Equal pay seemed more fair to all and was decided by all the producers.

To avoid financial tension, we also decided to develop new projects with a bigger turnover to permit the equalisation of salaries instead of having one set of producers “paying” for the others. So we now organise paid visits by people and big events on the farm and are thinking of starting a training programme as well.

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This inspiring and innovative project is experimenting with a new way of thinking, living and working together. It focuses on interconnections between public-spirited and professional activities, which generates added value for all the project partners. The farm was built on a social model of participative governance (self-organisation and joint decision making at the relevant level) and an economic model of community supported agriculture and short value chains. The community sees this model as economically and socially viable, and improving social cohesion in the neighbourhood, while making the community “more resilient and abundant”.



The professional farmers

Picture by Yan Hairong



Teenagers relaxing in the common space

Picture by Yan Hairong



IPES-Food team examining the tool shed

Picture by Yan Hairong



The notice board

Picture by Yan Hairong