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Current trends in North American urban agriculture: opportunities for governments and NGOs.

While urban agriculture is not a new phenomenon in North American cities, there has been a rapid increase in this activity over the last couple of decades, contributing to significant changes in local food systems for some urban neighbourhoods. The challenge for cities that are experiencing this phenomenon is to understand the nature of this movement and to incorporate the diverse activities associated with urban agriculture into their policy framework and into the daily management of the urban landscape. Governments and NGOs have an opportunity to foster these activities to strengthen neighbourhoods and increase quality of life in our cities.

Based on a recent 30,000 kilometre road trip through parts of the United States and Canada, this paper presents an overview of trends and patterns in urban agriculture, and offers some suggestions for policy that can support and enhance food production in our cities. While offering viable sources of food production, urban agriculture is primarily about community and social development, increasing capacity, and building skills. One of the obvious benefits is that we can grow a considerable amount of food in nearby plots; it has been estimated that the WWII Victory Garden movement in the United States produced 40% of the fresh produce consumed by Americans at that time.

Some of today's urban agriculture is based on the Victory Gardens of the past, but there are new practices emerging that have the potential to support even greater food production in the urban landscape. The patterns that emerged from my cross-continental tour can be divided into roughly six categories: urban farms (both non-profit and for-profit), community gardens, student farms, urban planning and design, academic research, and urban agriculture as hobby.

Ironically, because we have squandered our soil resources through urban sprawl and the paving over of agricultural soils, it is often possible to find large remnants of arable soils within many North American cities. As well, there are often working farms that have been surrounded by urban development over time, and that offer an opportunity to maintain a working farm environment for the benefit of entrepreneurs who wish to farm in the city, and for urban residents who can access fresh food nearby. The McVean Farm in Brampton is an example of a creative partnership that offers access to arable soil. This fifty-acre facility is owned by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and leased to FarmStart as a research and training facility on a long-term lease. The facility accommodates several farm enterprises including, The Fresh Veggies, Small Potatoes Farm and The Cutting Veg. FarmStart has a successful New Farmer Incubator Program, a program that supports new farm enterprises by offering access to land, equipment and infrastructure at reasonable rates, along with business planning support, technical training, mentorship and experience with ecological and emerging farming methods. The challenge for programs like this, and for any urban farmer, is getting access to arable land in the city; the McVean farm is a creative way to provide that access. Municipal governments and staff can provide access to greenway and conservation lands for food production and farmer training purposes, where appropriate.

It has been federal policy to promote capital-intensive monoculture and land consolidation for the purposes of exporting commodities; this may well remain the majority activity in our food system. However, one of the outcomes of this policy, I believe, has been the devaluation of farming occupations. We need to foster a new generation of highly-skilled farmers who are interested in small-scale intensive production in the urban and near-urban landscape. We also need to educate Canadians about the importance of a diverse, resilient food production system, and what it takes to create such a system.

For those who are interested in cultivating urban soils for food, there is a need for soil-testing protocols so that farmers are not exposed to dangerous contaminants, and the food they harvest is not contaminated as well. The CMHC's *Inventory and Assessment of Sustainable Community Best Practice Guides for the Canadian Housing Sector (Socio-economic Series 09-023)* lists urban agriculture under the 'Green spaces and landscaping' theme. However, many urban agriculture projects are developed on brownfield sites. This can be a positive use of such sites; the Artscape Wychwood Barns in Toronto is an example of a creative collaboration and design approach in turning a pig's ear into a silk purse. This site did contain contaminants which were remediated as part of a successful adaptive reuse of the old industrial site. The Toronto Food Strategy states that 1 in 10 Toronto households cannot afford to eat a healthy diet. These households are often located in food desert neighbourhoods that contain brownfields. As with the Wychwood Barns, there is a role for government in the development of soil-testing protocols for food production purposes. The possibility of linking brownfield remediation with food production, training and community development has the potential to reverse the cascade of health, social and environmental problems associated with food deserts in our urban neighbourhoods.

Those who work in the multi-faceted area of urban agriculture have diverse goals. This multidimensional aspect relates to the numerous goals of a number of ministries, different jurisdictional levels and non-government organizations. A few examples include Citizenship and Immigration, Community and Social Services, Agriculture and Food, Health Promotion, Community Sustainability and Brownfield Redevelopment. While we may feel individually that the food system is not our personal responsibility, food is ultimately at the core of the work of all of us.