

Home and Community Gardens in South-East Asia

Potential and opportunities to contribute to nutrition-sensitive food systems

fact sheet

06/2013

What are the problems?

- Current food systems in the South-East Asian region are unsustainable in the context of both supply and demand of food.
- The 'double burden of disease', where undernutrition and obesity coexist side-by-side, is a severe challenge in South-East Asia.
- The proportion of underweight children in South-East Asia is 19 per cent, the third largest share after South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, 12.7 per cent of under-five-year-olds in the region are either at the risk of being overweight, or obese.
- Environmental sustainability and rapid urbanization, as in the broader Asia-Pacific region, are of growing concern in South-East Asia. As a consequence, the region is confronting enormous environmental challenges that are already serious, including air pollution, congestion, CO₂ emissions, deprivation in water and basic sanitation, and vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change.

What are home and community gardens?

- Home gardens are privately managed by families and they are considered a viable development approach to improve nutrition.
- Community gardens refer to open spaces that are managed and operated by members of a local community to cultivate food. Other forms of community gardens include those that are cultivated by a community, such as a school, prison, or hospital, and neighbourhood gardens. Subsets of community gardens are urban green commons, including rooftop gardens, and edible landscapes.
- Home and community gardens can be considered a nutrition-sensitive approach because they have scope to address all three components of malnutrition, namely undernutrition, insufficient micronutrient and mineral intake, and overnutrition. They are therefore suitable approaches in settings where both obesity and undernutrition present a public health problem, as faced by many South-East Asian countries.

What do we know about the benefits of home and community gardens?

The Rio+20 outcome document "The Future We Want" recognizes that *poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production, and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development.*

Nutrition-sensitive food systems can be considered as a building block of sustainable development that contribute through the three pillars of society, environment and economy.

Social

- Reported benefits of home and community gardens include enhanced food supply and increased diversity of food, especially for the poor.
- There is evidence that participation in home garden activities contributes to improved nutrition status through a measurable impact on reduced night blindness among children due to increased vitamin A intake.
- Studies conclude that household food production strategies that include foods rich in protein, energy, and micronutrients, such as vegetables, pulses, animal source foods and certain root crops, hold promise for improving in particular the nutrition of women and children.
- School-based health and nutrition programmes can potentially result in positive outcomes for the health and nutrition status of children because promoting good health and nutrition before and during school age is essential to effective growth and development. However, there is no good evidence showing the causal linkage.
- Another benefit is enhanced empowerment of people involved in gardening, particularly women. Through an increase in skills, and a larger contribution to household income through products sold, women participating in gardening schemes have reported increased decision-making power. Home and community gardens are reported to increase social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Environment

- Gardens have an interesting relationship to urbanization because urbanization and the spread of industrial land limits the space available for food production, yet as people move from rural to urban environments, the amount of food consumed in cities increases.
- Gardens can reduce environmental impact, as they can insulate houses against extreme temperatures and thus reduce domestic energy use, improve localized air cooling and help mitigate flooding. Gardens also contribute to enhanced biodiversity.
- However, if not well managed, the food production in gardens in urban areas may result in health and sanitation issues, including through misuse of fertilizers and pesticides.

Economy

- Home production in gardens in rural and urban settings has been shown to be an important source of food and income, in particular in situations of economic distress.
- Reported benefits of home and community gardens include a contribution to household income through food sales.

How to support the implementation of home and community gardens

- The ASEAN region, through its ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint that formulates sustainable development strategies and related actions for the region, provides an impetus to support development of home and community gardens through inclusion into national development road maps.
- Land access continues to be a major constraint in respect to broader implementation of home and community gardens. Such constraints can be overcome by developing protective laws and regulations for open spaces, by addressing issues of tenure and land rights, and also by encouraging formation and capacity-building of local organizations and supporting and strengthening municipal councils.
- Coordination of dialogue amongst different stakeholders beyond primary users is important for the sustainability of gardens as it affects the sense of ownership and belonging of participants to programmes and the role of various partners. This can include the facilitation of multi-stakeholder processes, for instance, in the development of industrial areas or open spaces. In addition, better coordination across ministries with different

portfolios, such as Agriculture, Health and Education is vital to ensure coherency of policies that support garden development.

- Improved access to markets allows producers to easily sell small quantities of produce.
- Expanded research and development for enhanced access to technologies for small-scale farming is required, which includes seeds and planting material, plant protection, water management in urban gardens and waste management.
- A number of vegetable production technologies have shown good successes in the context of small garden production and scored high on SATNET Asia's sustainability indicator. These technologies have been practiced at some scale in South Asia, but hold promise for South-East Asia as well. Technology options that can be considered for home and community gardens include organic vegetable production in sacks, recycled plastic bottles or other containers, school gardens and several composting approaches.

Policy recommendations

- Home and community gardens are one tool to achieve more sustainable development with a nutrition and health focus. However, they should not be considered as the only solution available to enhance nutrition-sensitive food systems.
- More collaboration in research on the benefits of gardening is required, between nutritionists, medical doctors, agronomists, economists and social scientists, to better understand the complex and multi-faceted interactions of gardening towards the achievement of sustainable development goals.
- Sound and rigorous evaluation methods need to be developed based on clear indicator frameworks. Monitoring and evaluation should be built into gardening programmes from the outset, and findings should be clearly communicated to policymakers, consumers and other stakeholders to support advocacy efforts.
- Collaboration across line ministries and authorities is a crucial element of success, as with all projects and activities that support multi-dimensional, nutrition-sensitive approaches.

Selected references

Available at:
<http://www.uncapsa.org/publication/Fact-Sheet-Home-and-Community-Garden-062013.pdf>

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Funded by the
 European Union