

# **Uneven Recognition: Community Gardens or Allotments?**

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# Uneven Recognition: Community Gardens or Allotments?

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My PhD Thesis entitled “Urban Agriculture & Democratisation: Comparing Allotments & Community Gardens Trajectories in London” presents the contributions of Urban Agriculture practitioners in expanding the political space towards a democratic food regime. It assesses the specific democratic processes of each trajectory and how they seek another way for urban citizens to engage with food and place. Through historical and ethnographic in-depth case studies, the thesis sheds on the struggles faced by UA practitioners to create a more just and sustainable food system. It explores how community UA practitioners engage with, negotiate, or resist current governance networks to expand the political space towards these democratic processes, this thesis also highlights some of the discriminations at play. Interestingly, the research indicates a prioritisation of the community gardening trajectory over the more traditional allotment trajectory by local policymakers and planners. My intervention will review what this means in terms of land distribution for Urban Agriculture, the establishment of democratic food governance, and the resistance to neo-liberal urban development in the context of a corporate environment Food Regime. Specifically, I will discuss how bottom-up initiatives contrast with the top-down tendency of neo-liberal public partnerships that tend to co-opt the Urban Agriculture movement in delivering social prescribing on meanwhile spaces, and ways forward in building solidarity between these various UA groups.

Keywords: Allotments, Community Gardens, Governance, Prioritisation.

## Introduction

Over the last 7 years, I had the chance to study a wide range of Urban Agriculture initiatives in and around London, and in this paper, I will elaborate on one of the main empirical findings of this PhD research, namely, the prioritisation of the community garden trajectory over the allotment trajectory by London policymakers and planners and what this means for the future of Urban Agriculture (UA) in London.

Conversations with practitioners, scholars, and activists in the field and a detailed review of planning and public policy documents referring to UA in London reveal how the allotment trajectory has been sidelined in comparison with the community gardening trajectory in London. This paper will discuss what this means in terms of land distribution for UA, the establishment of democratic food governance, and the resistance to neo-liberal urban development in the context of a corporate environment Food Regime.

## The Impact of Community Gardening Prioritisation on Re-Claiming Land for Urban Agriculture

Since the start of the 2008 Capital Growth Campaign in London, local authorities reports around the progress of UA in the UK capital are often very optimistic, and one could even argue, misleading...

On the one hand, Fletcher & Collins (2020) reported that 41 London allotment sites closed completely between 2013 and 2020, but on the other hand, Capital Growth reported the creation of more than 2,700 new community gardens between 2008 and 2018 (GLA, 2018, 31). While these numbers indicate a certain prioritisation of the community garden model over the allotment one, the impact of this prioritisation on the scale of community food production in London or the general quantity of land available for community food growing is not clear due to a lack of appropriate information available on land devoted to UA under each trajectory.

Some observers, such as Chang (2013), argued that there was no serious increase in food production from the Capital Growth Programme between 2008 and 2013. While others have argued that the land made available for community gardening is, in any case, not comparable to that of allotments in terms of size or duration of the lease (Participant Observation, 14.03.23).

Despite these observations, the Capital Growth campaign still tends to be considered successful in the establishment of a strong network of UA practitioners. Indeed, many community gardens in the network benefited from the information available in the newsletter (policy progress, best practices, new grant opportunities, activity reports, and helpful statistics to support the movement), and some even accessed helpful webinars or training (Sustain, 2019, 7). However, while it is true that this campaign has created important connections between UA projects and practitioners, thereby strengthening London's UA's political recognition, it is less clear how many community growing projects started or even benefitted from the campaign in more tangible terms, and most importantly, in terms of land turned into cultivation.

This is important because, between 2008 and 2012, the Capital Growth campaign partnered with funders for London-wide grants aiming to create 2012 growing spaces for the 2012 London Olympics, an objective that they achieved according to their reports (Sustain, 2013). However, the new community growing spaces created back then ranged from legitimate new community gardens to small accessible raised beds in existing allotments, schools, or council estates, and it is unclear how many subsist today given the lack of available data.

During my PhD fieldwork, I became involved with the Wenlock Barn Estate community growing projects. This allowed me to review some of the long-term implications of this funding campaign since the Wenlock Barn Estate projects had been among the ones selected for East London Green Grid and Big Lottery's Local Food funding (part of Capital Growth). What I observed was that beyond initial funding, and once the professional initiators of the garden had left, very little support or even interest in the future of the gardens was demonstrated. If it were not for the residents organising themselves, many projects would have ceased functioning or closed once their funding cycle had been completed (which happened to the "Herb Garden" project in that estate). This lack of support beyond initial funding led to some speculation about the potential failures of the Capital Growth campaign from some observers (Nunes et al., 2015, 63).

Interestingly, Capital Growth holds a map of the sites in its network, but it is unclear how gardens on this map benefitted from the network's support or if they simply signed up so they could appear on the main map recording UA projects in London. To ensure that this map is up-to-date and not populated with spaces that are now closed, a record of the active accounts on their platform is kept by Capital Growth staff (recorded over the last 3 years) (Participant Observation, 15.05.2023). However, many projects do not update their account regularly, meaning some sites appearing on the map could have been closed within the last 3 years, while others that are not listed on the map may be thriving without ever having signed up (e.g., SHAS, an allotment studied as part of my research was not part of their network but has been thriving since 1894 and is much bigger than any of the community gardens present on this map). What this unfortunately demonstrates is that most of the data collected tends to concentrate on the most active sites, those that adopt a professionalised non-profit social service approach, and not the vulnerable, purely community-led sites.

Some may argue that the inability of Capital Growth to effectively monitor the successes and failures of the sites it helped set up between 2008 and 2012 can be seen as evidence of a tokenistic attitude towards UA (considering that announcing the campaign's successes in supporting new growing spaces is more beneficial for them than tracking each site's good health). However, I would tend to argue that it is evidence of a lack of means from Capital Growth (its resources have decreased over the last 8 years) and a lack of community champions keeping track of their gardens' accounts. Hence, while the Capital Growth Network

keeps growing on paper, it is unclear how many of the early sites still subsist today, and there can be speculations on whether the campaign has been as successful as it claims.

Overall, with regards to the issue of land, and when taking the figures provided by the London Assembly Environment Committee from 1996 to 2006, there was a net loss of about 35 hectares of allotment land in London during that period (London Assembly Environment Committee, 2006, 6). Moreover, considering that Fletcher & Collins (2020) argue that the rate of disappearance of allotments in London has tripled during the last 10 years, it could be hypothesised that approximately 105 hectares have been lost during this period. Even if there is no way to verify if this is an exaggeration, this number is considerably higher than the 79 hectares of new community gardens created by the Capital Growth campaign between 2008 and 2018 (GLA, 2018, 31), and from which many may not have survived. However, these numbers are assumptions based on previous research, and a general lack of available data on actual land use means further research is needed to verify these hypotheses.

### **The Disparity in Public Policy Representation between Allotments and Community Gardens**

While it is unclear what the impact of the prioritisation of community gardens versus allotments has been in terms of land distributed for UA, public policy analysis clearly reveals that there has been a political prioritisation.

For example, there was no mention of allotments in any of the minutes of the London Food Board between March 2017 and September 2021, and while the London Food Strategy 2018 mentions the protection of “existing allotment sites” as an aspiration, it only calls for the “provision of space for community gardens” (GLA, 2018, 46). Similarly, the London Plan 2021 policy G8 states that it aims to “protect existing allotments and encourage the provision of space for Urban Agriculture” without specifying the need for new allotments or longer tenures for these new growing spaces (Mayor of London, 2021, 331). Instead, the plan simply mentions that developers need to be “explicit over how long sites will be available to the community” (Ibid). This omission has been noted by allotment societies and Sustain (the alliance for better food and farming that oversees capital growth) who participated in the London Plan Consultation, but none of their recommendations to rephrase the objectives of the plan and to include longer tenures on new sites have been adopted in the final document (Ealing Dean Allotment Society, 2020, 2; London Food Link & Sustain, 2020, 10).

This indicates a general willingness amongst policymakers to reinforce the flexibility of community growing spaces in planning rather than provide them with more longevity (or at least an inability to address these questions). Still, the general absence of allotments from these conversations may also partly be due to their isolation because they have often been portrayed as privileged spaces that lack connection with the wider community or environmental issues when compared to community gardens. This may have influenced the makeup of the London Food Board, since the different Mayors of London found it easier to find specialists on urban food issues from the ranks of professionalised “social service based” community gardens rather than allotmenters, as the former tended to be more vocal over recent years. Besides, even with a representative of the allotment trajectory on the board, it would still not have been certain that the issue of allotment recognition could have been brought forward since the Chair remains the main person who makes decisions and other members’ voices are quite limited (Halliday & Barling, 2018, 190).

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to see that the Islington policy on allotments, for example, stated that “it is both simpler and more effective to create community gardens and other food growing opportunities rather than allotment sites” (Islington council, 2021, 7). Despite Islington having opened a new allotment in 2010, the cost of creating a new allotment is still “considerable”, and for many, community gardens are said to “provide a better

community facility than allotments” (Ibid). This is how community groups have responded when asked why there was a prioritisation of community gardens rather than allotments. For instance, the Islington-based group Octopus Communities stated that it was mostly “because of the lack of space [...] and because only a few benefits from the allotments” (Interview Quadrant Estate Member, 23.11.2021).

As a result, there is a clear consensus that community gardens are preferable in inner London boroughs, as they can widen the beneficiaries of UA in London without having to create more spaces. Moreover, many argue that “most people don’t grow primarily to feed the family – they do it for enjoyment, so massive plots are an anachronism in many cases.” (Appleby, 2016). This is true, but it is also significant to note that practicing UA for self-sufficiency and self-determination holds very different and radical meanings to that of leisure gardening (Crouch, 1997). While the argument for broadening participation may be understandable, the assumption that community gardens provide a better community facility than allotments is problematic. Indeed, if you compare the neo-liberal political positioning of community gardens today with the radical emancipatory allotment movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Andrews & Palmer, 2016; Burchardt, 2002; Crouch, 1997), it is clear that some community gardens align themselves more towards sustainability fixes (McCann et al., 2022), and as such, the exclusion of allotments and other subaltern urbanisms from the more mainstream channels can be representative of certain power dynamics that deserve to be explored (Ginn and Ascensão, 2018).

## The Changing Functions and Convergence of UA Trajectories

Following this discussion on the apparent prioritisation of community gardens in terms of land distribution and policy representation, it is now necessary to explore the consequences of such prioritisation on the democratic and transformative potential of UA.

As discussed above, the possibility of delivering more benefits to local populations while using less space and fewer resources is starting to convince outer London boroughs, which also suffer from similar land shortages. The result is that the allotment trajectory is starting to resemble the community garden trajectory. This is done through multiple mechanisms, such as dividing up plots, creating community plots, seeking out grants, and/or increasing the administration of the sites to ensure a quicker turnaround of participants. This is demonstrated by this quote from a Croydon allotment officer:

*“We try to maximise space, like reduce it in size, multiple occupancies... We don’t give one family one full plot because we want to increase the amount of coverage. [...] what you need to understand is improving does not always mean opening more and more sites because that will waste a lot of our money and maybe that’s something that is not needed.” (Interview Allotment Officer Croydon, 12.11.2021)*

Here, it is useful to examine the underlying assumptions of the local authority narrative. It is mentioned that opening new sites could be a “waste”, which seems to indicate that either there is no perceived demand or that allotments are not perceived as substantial enough in value compared to other investments. Again, this may be yet another piece of evidence of the inability of policymakers to recognise all the values generated by UA spaces. Another argument is that it is better to improve existing sites than to open new ones, which is what the Croydon Council tried to do in 2019 by injecting £350,000 into the sites they directly manage, to provide much-needed repairs and amenities (Inside Croydon, 2019). It is certainly true that Croydon Council already struggles to administer their current sites, and that any new sites would represent an additional and unsustainable burden for them. However, it would be false to say that new sites are “something that’s not needed” or “unsustainable”, given the increasing allotment waiting lists in Croydon and elsewhere (and the fact that these new sites can also be self-administered). The fact that recently a private allotment has opened in Croydon and proposes

allotment plots at a much higher price for those who can afford them evidences the need for more affordable allotment plots in the borough (Roots Allotments, 2024).

The issue is that as an outer London borough, Croydon has a statutory duty to provide enough plots under the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908. That is, if they believe that there is a demand for allotments. However, there is a tendency for councils to minimise actual demand because of their incapacity to deliver on it. Due to this inability, LAs like Croydon Council are pressured to adopt a narrative that shifts the definition of the problem from one of value recognition to one of a culture of social welfare dependence. In doing so, the council transfers welfare responsibilities to the communities themselves without acknowledging that they lack the power and resources to undertake them. Overall, this increased tendency for LAs to outsource community gardening projects to the same professional organisations continues to erode the capacity of the state to deliver its own UA projects while impacting the diversity, representability, pedagogy, and level of democratic conscientisation on UA sites.

While allotments may need to progressively evolve towards more subdivisions to increase the numbers of active volunteers on their sites, and to widen their benefits to the community, this should not divert attention away from the real necessity, which is to plan and reclaim more spaces for UA in London. Not everyone realises this necessity, and this is partly due to the tendency of each group to not see the broader picture when it comes to the landscape of UA distribution in London. Local councils tend to only consider the provision of allotments within their administrative boundaries, ignoring the reality of allotment provision across London as a whole.

It may be more just to only focus on provisions within the confines of the borough due to the disparity of land availability and real estate value among London's boroughs. However, because of this administrative fragmentation, it becomes difficult to assess real needs at the London level. This led Fletcher and Collins (2020, 9) to argue that allotment provision should no longer be considered on a case-by-case basis if we want equal opportunities to grow food across London, but that instead, the effects on the distribution of allotments must be considered using mapping techniques and increased communication between boroughs. Understanding this, Capital Growth has established inter-council quarterly meetings beginning in late 2021, allowing for better assessment of needs across the capital, and is currently developing a more regional series of events for UA practitioners across the South, East, West, and North regions of London. Inter-council meetings are particularly effective, according to Capital Growth, since councils are more inclined to be inspired by the actions of their peers (Participant Observation, 15.05.2023).

With all this in mind, while there has been some governance pressure from the bottom since 2004, as well as a more proactive role of LA's in connecting sectors and areas, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. food partnership coordinator roles 2021, food transition plans 2021, right to grow campaign 2021, food growing network and strategies 2021) (Turcu & Rotolo, 2022), the more mundane "subaltern" UA community involved in the politics of self-determination remains extremely vulnerable and unrecognised. Indeed, under the current model, long-term approaches based on ethics of care, knowledge and service coproduction, and the recognition of the commons' complexity seem to have been replaced by neo-liberal sustainability fixes, which tend to prioritise social prescribing, cost efficiency, and single-issue criticisms. The combination of all of this could have dramatic repercussions on the capacity of community members to innovate and articulate alternative common imaginaries and policy priorities (Shostak, 2022, 960).

## Conclusion

As more councils across the country begin to divide up plots and build new smaller allotment sites (APSE, 2022), there is a real feeling among community gardeners and allotmenters that

“the two (trajectories) are converging” in terms of social organisation (Interview Quadrant Estate Member, 23.11.2021). But whether such a degree of convergence maximises the democratic processes of both trajectories is far from clear. At present, we are witnessing more of a replacement of one trajectory by the other than a convergence. Indeed, allotments have been drawing inspiration from community gardens, especially with regards to a widening of their functions beyond food and a growing accessibility, which can be defined as democratisation. Community gardens, I argue, have not sufficiently connected with the rich history of the allotment trajectory (however, the recent rapprochement between Capital Growth and NSALG regarding legal aid against eviction is a positive development). Moreover, community gardens that are increasingly moving away from collective self-organising principles to becoming providers of services in place of the State can fall short in terms of community ownership and food regime democratisation. As such, it is argued that community gardens, as well as allotments that begin to resemble community gardens, often continue to subsidise the cutbacks to State-sponsored services by engaging in a race to the bottom aimed at delivering more with less, and the result is a consolidation of neo-liberal governmentality within UA.

Under all these circumstances, the current public policy prioritisation of community gardens over allotments seems to be detrimental to the democratisation of our food regime. To have the best of both worlds, other social and political practices and other forms of governance for UA are needed. What should be adopted for a more democratic food regime, however, is still unclear for many, but that is the very purpose of this conference.

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