Context

Almere is part of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, located on the southern Polderland, land that was reclaimed from the sea, and on which the city was built beginning in 1976. Today the city has around 200,000 inhabitants and it plans to grow to more than 300,000, with an increase of about 5,000 new citizens per year.

Since its birth, Almere was designed to balance built areas and green spaces with an increasing focus on urban agriculture and horticulture. The new expansions of the city include a defined number of professional multifunctional farms and areas in which citizens can grow food on their own. In 2022, Almere will host the Expo Floria, an exhibition that is co-promoted by the International Association of Horticultural Producers (AIPH) and for which 60 hectares will be dedicated to the role of horticulture in future cities.

Overview of the food practice

Starting in 1986, a new horticultural area named “Buitenvaart” was created in the peri-urban north of Almere to facilitate the settlement of greenhouses dedicated to the production of vegetables and flowers. Now Buitenvaart is the Netherlands’ largest urban horticultural area and it hosts a number of greenhouses dedicated to food production for the city.

An example of this practice is “Onze Volkstuin” (our allotment), an initiative started in 2012 by Ron Swet, a citizen of Almere, an enthusiastic entrepreneur, and a former cultivator of roses in greenhouses. Aiming at bringing healthy organic food back to the city with no pesticides or other chemical products, this bottom-up initiative is based on a greenhouse in which plots of land can be rented by individuals or families. For many years, Ron Swet had encountered strong competition from imported products from Africa and Asia, which led him to explore other opportunities to keep his greenhouse financially viable. He discovered that many urban food garden complexes in Almere were full. Moreover, maintaining an allotment in open areas is a big commitment for many people in terms of both time and labor. With this in mind, he decided to exchange his rose nursery for allotments in a greenhouse, which can be rented by the inhabitants of the city, creating an original and less demanding community garden.

The minimum dimension of a plot is 12 m² (3x4 m²), with a cost of EUR 23 per month and the possibility of renting different plots. A garden for a family with two parents and two children is 40 m², and provided with a water tap. To raise awareness and knowledge on organic local food, the project offers school programmes, organizes training courses at the beginning of each season, and provides guidance and advice to non-green-thumbed people, although experience shows that the participants themselves have a great deal of knowledge and expertise.

Results and lessons learned

This project originated from a combination of human, socio-economic, and institutional conditions: the motivation and determination of the private individual owner, a demand for the product (fundamentally to ensure financial sustainability), and the support of local authorities that planned a large peri-urban area dedicated to entrepreneurial commercial urban agriculture.

Allotments in the greenhouse give individual growers the advantage of growing crops that are not suited to the growing region and season in which they live. This also allows consumers to purchase affordable and nutritious locally-grown fruits, vegetables and flowers out of season, without worrying about potentially harmful pesticide residue. Moreover, knowledge around cultivation and harvesting techniques is shared among growers with different backgrounds, with the involvement of vulnerable groups (e.g., families, children, elderly, displaced and migrants). This has a therapeutic effect on many people, further contributing to the creation of a healthier urban environment. During the first year 70 people joined Onze Volkstuin and, due to high demand, in 2013 and 2014 the greenhouse was enlarged to host other allotments: some school gardens were promoted, and a support service was organized for families wishing to start a vegetable garden in their house. The concept of Onze Volkstuin has also been applied in other Dutch cities and provinces such as Groningen and Zuid-Holland.

The studies carried out for future city planning, also based on the experience of the Buitenvaart area, highlight the commitment of Almere to support local food production. The aim is to produce 20 percent of the total demand for food (vegetables, fruits, milk and eggs) within a radius of 20 km from the city centre, considering the dedication of 50 percent of the land to animal feed production. With the same concept, in the new large expansion of the city of Almere, called Oosterwold, which counts about 15,000 new houses, 50 percent of the district’s 4,000 hectares will be dedicated to urban agriculture and horticulture. Special attention is given to the involvement of citizens in city planning and to the facilitation of do-it-yourself activities that combine building and community food gardening. Localized production in these areas should also guarantee a reduction of the energy produced - so as to support partial heating of the new houses - as well as a reduction of CO₂ emissions in the city area. This reduction should be generated by the use of renewable energy, energy saving technologies throughout the whole supply chain and reduction of chemical inputs in production.

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