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# Ensuring Citizenship Rights: Cooperation and Tensions in the Governance of Urban Community Gardens

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**Abstract.** The manifold social, cultural and health benefits of urban community gardens have received much attention in the literature on urban ecosystem services and nature-based solutions off late. Despite recognition of these benefits by many city governments, critical scholarship in urban political ecology has, however, also shown that urban community gardens can stand in tension with other municipal agendas, in which economic growth is prioritized over social justice. While highlighting some of these tensions, in this paper we pay particular attention to possibilities for cooperation with municipalities and to the possibilities of promoting more inclusive urban citizenship. In the past, community gardens were frequently set up by municipalities for urban residents to respond to food scarcity and public health issues. Today, they are often still founded in periods of socio-economic crisis either by municipalities or by community actors themselves. We discuss whether and if so, how, such a cooperation may promote substantive citizenship rights, while highlighting some of the tensions that counteract this aim. The paper draws on case studies conducted as part of the EU-Horizon2020-funded project NATURVATION (Grant Agreement 730243) and suggests methods for citizen engagement that municipalities can adopt in order to enhance participation in the cooperative development of urban community gardens.

## 1. Introduction

In its recommendations for sustainable livelihood strategies, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) flags up urban and peri-urban horticulture as a pathway out of poverty, which contributes to cities' resilience and to their economic development [1]. Urban community gardens (UCGs) could be seen as a form of urban horticulture through which these proclaimed benefits materialize. Yet, they are often reported as sites where minority urban populations contest their politico-economic marginalization while also functioning as a means for responding to socioeconomic crises under neoliberal conditions [2,3,4,5,6]. In this paper we ask whether this struggle for claiming rights to the city is necessarily placed in a context of resistance to economic agendas. And, can the interests of different urban actors be reconciled through cooperation between community members and municipalities? We present two of several examples of UCGs researched as part of the EU-Horizon2020-funded project NATURVATION (Grant Agreement 730243), which were promoted and supported by the state in times of socioeconomic crises. However, cooperation might not always ensure citizenship rights, whether in terms of access to the city and public spaces [7] or in terms of participation in urban governance and the use of land as a shared resource. While gardening activities might not always be explicitly political, these tensions over rights to the city bring the politics of the



everyday to light [8]. By focusing on cooperation and tensions in the way(s) citizenship rights are claimed and negotiated in UCGs, we aim to examine their political role while proposing ways in which municipalities can support active citizen engagement in and through urban gardening.

## **2. Tensions in the Governance of Urban Community Gardens for Citizenship and Inclusion**

Considerable evidence in the literature shows that UCGs bring a range of benefits to urban communities. Armstrong [9] considers them as safe open spaces, in which physical activities take place, with advantages both for people's well-being and for environmental and community disinvestments [10]. Baker [8], Pudup [3], and Irazábal & Punja [6] point them out as places to combat food insecurity and improve nutrition, while Ghose & Pettygrove [5] and Schmelzkopf [11] highlight them as place-based community developments which promote integration of people from different backgrounds. It is, however, difficult to quantify these benefits and to account for subjective values that people attribute to them, leading to skepticism over the precise need for open space and nature in cities [11]. This might influence how citizenship rights are ensured and who has access to them.

Rosol [12] highlights this ambiguity. She points out that, on the one hand, UCGs are spaces of citizenship in which gardeners are decision-makers and green space managers. On the other hand, community involvement can become a potential outsourcing strategy of municipalities, as local state responsibilities can be passed onto to civil society through gardeners' voluntary work. So, the fact that gardeners actively shape their communities [8], could simultaneously legitimate neoliberal strategies to make citizenship rights conditional on volunteering and on alleviating the state of social and infrastructure service provision [4] as a mechanism to govern common-pool resources [such as energy, water, etc. See 13], especially in periods of socioeconomic crises. Here, we do not refer to citizenship rights as legal categories defined by nation-states but as substantive rights for people to formulate and to act on their ideas [14]; so, emphasis is thus placed on practices, meanings, and identities [7].

It is not a new phenomenon that UCGs can function as a means of responding to crisis. Cabral et al. [15] thus reported that municipalities implemented UCGs in some European cities in order to provide food during both World Wars, while Lawson [16] comprehensively analyzed vacant-lot UCGs in the USA including transitions from those set up to tackle food insecurity in times of socioeconomic crises (e.g. during the Great Depression in the 1930s and the two World Wars) [see also 3,9,10], to contemporary grassroots projects developed in the context of the neoliberal city. For instance, current UCGs in cities such as New York [2,9,11,17], Los Angeles [6], Milwaukee [4,5], San Francisco [3], Minneapolis [10], and even Toronto in Canada [8], are frequently described as sites of contestation through which minority urban populations demand rights to the city and protest against their socio-economic and political marginalization. Urban political ecologists have pointed out, however, that such attempts to claim urban citizenship rights may be undermined by urban governments' use of UCGs as an easy, low-cost means to revitalize underused, vacant plots while making citizenship conditional upon active participation [2,4,17]. This might fragment bottom-up initiatives in a competitive environment for volunteering [5], in which individuals are made responsible for their own adjustment to socioeconomic restructuring [3].

Such conditions appear not to be exclusive to North American contexts. Rosol [12] argues that conditions for UCGs are similarly ambivalent in Berlin, Germany and that volunteering has become a 'soft' neoliberal strategy, using grassroots engagement as unpaid labor for the production and maintenance of urban green spaces. These neoliberal forms of urban governance in which elites are empowered, minorities are marginalized, and protest ensues [18], might lead to severe social dilemmas characterized by a dominating strategy that yields the best outcome for individual interests regardless of common goals [19]. Nevertheless, they are not the guiding principle for all municipalities and municipal officers. In addition to the fact that political ideas and agendas are broader and more multi-faceted than sometimes captured in definitions of neoliberalism, opportunities for cooperation between gardening activists and municipalities may result from simultaneous social and economic benefits of UCGs and from efforts to reconcile conflicts of interest [4].

We argue that municipalities can become key mediators between stakeholders in UCGs. In order to demonstrate this, we present examples of UCGs in two European cities which were established by grassroots initiatives in cooperation with municipalities in times of socioeconomic crisis. Cooperation, however, fluctuates between short-term political motivations and longer-term social goals [20]. We confirm that, as previous studies have also demonstrated [see 21], when urban growth resumes, UCGs risk becoming commodities whose social benefits may be traded-in for revenue from private development, or they may lose out in the competition over increasingly scarce communally-owned land for public investment projects. Communities' access to land may thus be curtailed by normalized systems of exclusion and economic growth agendas [22], which may mean that the benefits of UCGs for greater urban inclusion are short-lived. The barriers for substantive citizenship that place-based social movements like UCGs face are thus not merely cultural or geographical [8], but also political.

### 3. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Citizenship Rights

Based on the SDGs defined in 2015 [23], we link the benefits of UCGs (outlined above) with SDG11, which focuses on making cities inclusive, resilient, and sustainable by means of efficient urban planning and management practices [24]. Yet, some concerns arise from framing SDG11 in this way:

- **Inclusiveness:** Although the public's participation remains essential for achieving sustainable development [25], citizenship rights risk becoming undermined by economic dynamics and municipal political decisions.
- **Sustainability to alleviate poverty:** Based on the aims of SDG 11, we argue that the lack of access to land and to basic services is a form of poverty with direct implications for sustainability. SDG 1 (and particularly Target 1.4), which addresses the need to tackle all forms of poverty [26], could play here an essential role. UCGs hold significant potential as spaces of resistance against poverty and hunger for marginalized urban populations, [12, 5]. However, when access to gardens is made dependent on the fulfilment of requirements, it might exclude people with no resources who are in need of gardens as a food source.
- **Efficient urban planning and management practices:** In relation to environmental governance, Robertson [27] points out the ambiguous role of the state as both a land developer and an environmental steward. Here, it is important to define clearly what is meant by 'efficiency' and what its benefits are intended to be. Efficient urban planning can lead to less consultation, restricted participation rights, and limited resources for engaging with different interests and needs. One can argue that the simultaneous promotion and restriction of citizen participation in UCGs that we explore in this paper is a way to make their management more efficient; however, it can also be seen as a strategy to "conduct the conduct" of gardeners and volunteers [27 paraphrasing 28], for whom the choices within which they can operate and therefore claim substantive participation are pre-configured.

These complex and ambivalent aspects suggest important issues to consider in pursuing SDG 11 and its links to other SDGs through UCGs. Thus, one needs to ask how actions for sustainability can be developed through the provision of urban green without deepening social inequality and exclusion. And, to what extent can municipalities take part in forms of cooperative governance that avoid, or at least minimize, potential negative impacts? In the remainder of the paper, we present case study examples of UCGs built by marginalized urban residents in cooperation with the city and examine both, possibilities for cooperation as well as tensions that arose from conditional citizenship.

### 4. Methodology

In order to examine the tensions and possibilities of UCG governance for substantive citizenship, we analyze case study materials gathered in 2017 and 2018 as part of the collaborative Horizon2020-funded international research project NATURVATION (Grant Agreement 730243). The aim of the project was to explore the contribution that nature-based solutions (NBS) can make to urban sustainability. NBS governance innovations were the focus of one of the project's work packages, consisting of a total of 54 case study examples researched in 12 European and 6 non-European cities. In this paper, however, we

do not aim to draw general conclusions about the explored cities, which can be found in Kiss *et al* [29]. Instead, we focus only on two examples of UCGs in order to show the complex realities and power webs that this specific form of NBS can entail. By means of mixed research methods (explained below for each case study), information was collected, analyzed and summarized in Working Papers by project partners in different cities. These documents form the base for our analysis of UCGs in two European cities that were set up with support from municipalities. We focus on the tensions between different stakeholders that emerged from municipal cooperation.

## 5. Case Studies

Cabral *et al* [15] described UCGs in Europe as an attempt to achieve both climate-related and societal goals through NBS, even as an interim use [p.241]. Yet, the aforementioned tensions they face in relation to conditional access based on voluntarism were not mentioned. Municipalities often endorse and support communal gardens as a way to respond to local socioeconomic crisis, which is the case in the two cities we examine here: Leipzig, Germany and Athens, Greece. In both cases, however, the reasons for supporting UCGs also harbored the risk that substantive citizenship rights and access to land might be undermined in the long run. Similar issues were found in the context of other UCGs researched in our project, as demonstrated by this interview excerpt from a gardening activist in Barcelona:

*“Why were gardens basically the most successful of proposals? This I also wondered. They (from the city council) said it was because the projects were more well defined, and also, this was also said, that it was easier to remove it afterwards, that is, if an infrastructure had to be built like a school or whatever, it is easier to remove a garden than a skate park for example... It is also quite normal. Another part is that the garden is seen also as an environmentally friendly project...”*  
*Researcher/activist in urban agriculture in Barcelona [30]*

### 5.1. Leipzig, Germany

Weiland [31] describes the significant growth of UCGs in Leipzig over the last two decades. Our findings deepen some aspects of this increase. They correspond to information gathered in 2017 as part of NATURVATION through in-depth interviews with local experts and gardening activists, site visits, participatory workshops and observations during guided walks, urban festivals, and public lectures. Further information was collected through documentary analysis of municipal reports, plans, newsletters, briefings, and press articles.

In the 1990s, the city of Leipzig saw an exponential increase in bottom-up initiatives in general and UCGs more specifically as a way to use the vacant lots that resulted from a large-scale population decrease. As population has increased in recent years, pressure on land as a resource for economic development has risen too [21, 32]. Citizen participation and revitalization of the city through NBS are part of the City’s long-term planning policies, yet, some constraints have been found. Thus, access to governance instruments and to cooperation for NBS might not be extended to all the citizens but appears to be strongly dependent on membership in legally-recognized groups. For instance, both of UCGs that we studied, *Querbeet* and *Bunte Gärten*, are registered as an official association (Verein). This is a precondition for them to receive support from the state. Table 1 shows some implications of this, both in terms of cooperation potentials and possible tensions.

### 5.2 Athens, Greece

Anthopoulou *et al* [33] mentioned that Greece never had a tradition of UCGs and associated the existing ones with the South European economic recession in 2011, in which urban food indigence was one of the outcomes. The NATURVATION research on NBS governance innovations produced more up-to-date findings gathered between November 2017 and January 2018 by means of semi-structured interviews with a variety of NBS stakeholders and a “mobile lab” in one of the UCG with government representatives, gardeners, volunteers, and visitors. Additional sources examined included, online

reports, legal documents, communication material, and articles written by independent experts and civil society groups.

**Table 1.** Cooperation and tensions in urban community gardens. Leipzig, Germany

	Cooperation	Tensions
<b>Leipzig</b>  <b>Gardens:</b> - Querbeet - Bunte Gärten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the time of urban shrinking the city encouraged several actors to use vacant spaces. As a result, the municipal “Plot Management System” was created and the City supported communal initiatives in negotiating temporary use rights for vacant plots.</li> <li>• UCGs were created by NGOs and citizen groups in partnership with the City, local businesses, land owners, and other citizen initiatives.</li> <li>• UCGs were supported by the municipality and by wider community networks; yet, the degree of support depends on their scale, priorities, organization, and location.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Due to urban growth, competition has recently risen over vacant lots. UCGs are increasingly competing with private developers and public investments in other priorities (e.g. schools or child care facilities). Several gardens have, as a consequence, needed to close or to relocate, as in the case of <i>Querbeet</i>, whose plot will be sold to private investors. Private property rights and/or other policy priorities here erode the longer-term possibilities of UCGs to deliver their socioecological benefits.</li> <li>• There is a dilemma in Leipzig related to either supporting socioenvironmental projects such as UCGs or developing the required infrastructure to service the growing population.</li> <li>• Support from the city authorities did not ensure permanent use rights, partly because of municipal budget constraints during the economic downturn of the 1990s.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Description and table information based on Leipzig Working Paper [32], see also [21].

**Table 2.** Cooperation and tensions in urban community gardens. Athens, Greece

	Cooperation	Tensions
<b>Athens</b>  <b>Gardens:</b> - Agios Dimitrios - Marousi 1 - Marousi 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several municipalities assumed the role of enhancing food production/provision after the years of crisis. In 2013, Marousi 2 was included in a mixed public-private partnership scheme on a national level.</li> <li>• The three gardens were set up on municipal land, from which AD and M2 were not categorized as developable. Additionally, gardens are located far from touristic attractions. This might explain why, so far, there have not been conflicts over the use of the land for other developments.</li> <li>• Agronomists and urban landscape designers were paid through the different funding schemes of each garden in order to support and to guide gardeners.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Garden beneficiaries were initially selected on the basis of socio-economic indicators of vulnerability (income levels, unemployment within families, etc.). Later on, rights to participate were unofficially defined on the basis of community and gardening behavior. Without a formal criteria, participants had to fulfill specific requirements in order to receive support.</li> <li>• Indicators of success for local officials are more related to “green” outcomes than to social and health benefits. For instance, Marousi city council’s main objective for the UCGs was to beautify empty plots. Therefore, less well cultivated plots were considered a failure.</li> <li>• The social organization varies from one municipality to another; yet, in each case, final decision-making and rule setting reside with the city councils.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Description and table information based on Athens Working Paper [34], see also [21]

Athens’ green space ranges between 2,3-3 m<sup>2</sup> per capita (the lowest in the European Union), so the implementation of UCGs could be expected to increase this ratio. We focus on three gardens here: Agios Dimitrios (AD), Marousi 1 (M1), and Marousi 2 (M2). In the case of these gardens, support from the

municipality seemed to be aimed less at community improvement than at providing help to people who met certain socio-economic vulnerability criteria. So far, there have not been conflicts for using the plots in which gardens are located, since they were implemented in peripheral areas where land is not as scarce nor as valuable as in the center of Athens. Tensions here resulted rather from municipal expectations concerning gardeners' practices, which made their citizenship conditional, as table 2 describes.

## 6. Cooperation as Comprehensive Community Development

Although cooperation from municipalities in the first stages of UCGs supported marginalized populations in times of crisis, our case studies show how such efforts were addressed to predefined groups and formal associations by means of volunteering, which might leave out other individuals in need of those spaces. It could therefore be argued that despite efforts on the part of municipalities to support these gardening initiatives, substantive citizenship rights were not ensured by working comprehensively with diverse communities but by selecting (by default or by design) those who meet certain requirements. If lack of access to land and to governance instruments is to be tackled as a way to alleviate poverty (SDG 1, mentioned above), then wider environmental justice issues connected to social exclusion should be considered in urban greening strategies for sustainability (SDG 11).

Hörschelmann *et al.* [35] suggest some ways to reconcile these tensions by means of certain citizen engagement methods including Appreciative Inquiry, Community Organizing, District-based Community Work, amongst others [see also 36]. While they cannot fundamentally alter structural conditions and alleviate deep-seated inequalities, they hold the potential of responding more sensitively to contextual conditions and to different needs of diverse urban publics:

- **Appreciative Inquiry:** This is a tool to identify what different community members consider as valuable features of the area they live in and to assess the resources that a community has access to, including not just financial means but also skills, knowledge, and social networks.
- **District-based Community Work:** Here, the aim is to enhance the living conditions in disadvantaged residential areas with help of local residents by building alliances between different community actors.
- **Community Organizing:** This method aims to build citizen organizations by including municipalities and other public bodies, so that it is possible to take action and to pursue their own interests through an effective organizational structure. [cf. 35, 36]

Through these methods, cooperation between municipalities and UCGs can be significantly enhanced in order to mediate interests between different stakeholders, while responding more sustainably (i.e. substantively) to the needs of marginalised communities. If FAO aims to promote urban horticulture initiatives such as UCGs, then promoting methods for communities to self-organize will be as necessary as promoting the benefits of gardens, so that potential negative impacts of greening strategies for sustainability, such as further social segregation through gentrification and loss of access to resources, can be foreseen and reduced.

## 7. Conclusion

International organizations such as FAO flag up the benefits of urban horticulture to tackle poverty and to improve urban resilience and economic development. In this paper, we pointed out some benefits of municipal support for UCGs as one such form of urban horticulture in times of socioeconomic crises while also highlighted potential tensions. The current paradigm of urban nature as a financial asset and of community as an object of state intervention shows how vulnerable grassroots organizations are to economic growth agendas and how greening actions for sustainability might simultaneously lead to social segregation and inequality. Municipal cooperation may, thus, indeed lead to different social tensions. For UCGs to be able both to deliver their full benefits and to promote substantive citizenship rights, challenges and competing interests need to be considered, which can vary between contexts. Three issues are here particularly important to be considered:

- UCGs are not a way out of poverty. They are only a way to alleviate it. Therefore, cooperation should be seen as a development process, not as a one-time support.
- Restricted access to public land as a shared resource is a contributing factor to urban poverty. By guaranteeing citizenship rights only to legally-recognized groups, marginalized individuals might be excluded, as they might not have the resources to join them or may not be sufficiently represented by them.
- The benefits of UCGs for social inclusion can be extended through the use of suitable citizen engagement methods that ensure recognition of diverse interests and of existing community resources. Such methods can pave the way to ensure that the benefits of UCGs accrue to the wider community instead of only to those who meet the conditions to participate.

To sum up, there are thus methods to mediate interests and to enable engagement between communities and municipalities. Beyond those methods for active participation and the implications for SDGs targets, however, we highlight the aim of municipal support as the most important factor, as long-term social change cannot be achieved through partial efforts and there cannot be a temporal municipal cooperation to alleviate entrenched conditions of social exclusion and poverty.

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