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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

The Role of Backyard Gardening in West African Cities – Evidence from Ghana and Burkina Faso

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Abstract

Urban backyard gardening is commonly characterised as mainly subsistence-oriented ‘niche farming’, whereas open space farming tends to be perceived as market-focused. However, few studies have systematically analysed the role of backyard gardening in urban and periurban food supply and income generation in West African cities.

This paper is based on a standardised survey conducted in Tamale, northern Ghana and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in September/October 2013. A total of 516 farmers were randomly sampled using a remote sensing-based approach. High resolution satellite images were used to classify built-up areas. In a second step, thirty areas were randomly selected in and around each city, stratified into urban (i.e. open space cultivation and backyard gardening) and periurban production. Those for backyard gardening had shares of built-up area between 50 and 80 percent. Within each cell, ten households were sampled using spatial random selection. Questionnaire data were triangulated with focus group discussions and interviews.

As expected, urban backyard gardens, open space farming sites and periurban villages differ in terms of plot sizes and cultivated crops. In contrast to common perceptions, the survey data show that backyard gardening contributes consistently to urban food markets despite the small-scale character of the production areas. On average, backyard farms produce about a third of their crops for commercial purposes.

Backyard farmers in Tamale most commonly cultivate green leafy vegetables and tomatoes for the market. In Ouagadougou, the thirsty crop lettuce is most commonly cultivated in backyards. In general, irrigation availability appears as a key production constraint. Many backyard farmers thus use the drought-tolerant okra to circumvent reliance on irrigation. This is the second most commonly cultivated subsistence and commercial crop year-round in both cities. Okra is frequently planted at the end of the rains as it could survive into the dry season on residual soil moisture, then dried and stored for year-round consumption and sale.

Innovative backyard farming thus contributes towards subsistence and commercial production in these West African cities. These farms should therefore not be forgotten in further research on food security and agricultural commercialisation strategies.

Keywords: Agricultural commercialisation, backyard gardening, land-use classification, spatial random sampling, urban agriculture, West Africa