



University of St.Gallen

Urban Agriculture Basel – More than Urban Gardening

Deductive Analysis of Food Activism & Food Politics Concepts

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Responsibility: Food Politics and the Limits of Markets

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1 Introduction

Urban agriculture is part of the momentum surrounding food system re-localization, sprouting up in the cities of the industrial world (McClintock, 2010, p. 1). “As a result of recent global problems, more and more people have been seeking out alternative economic and political models beyond market and state“ (Dellenbaugh, 2015, p. 9).

Living in an urban environment and being active vegetable growers ourselves, we wanted to examine the organization of Urban Agriculture Basel [UAB] and its answers to current pressing issues in regards to the food system, such as the increased distance between consumer and producer or the power shift towards large distributors. For more than two months we stayed in contact with UAB, joined the organization and participated in one of their public meetings. These ethnographic insights allowed us to explore specific ecological needs of the urban society in Switzerland that UAB satisfies and the ways in which the organization encourages and facilitates the production of sustainable foods through its existence and actions. The research question outlined above guided us as a thread through the research project, aiming at the comprehension of the whole organization and its community.

A profound literature review functions as the starting point of this paper by providing the theoretical framework. Topics related to food, sustainability, activism, collective and connective action as well as urban agriculture are covered. In a next chapter, an overview of the methodology and the specific techniques applied for collecting data in order to answer the research question is given. The core of the paper features the presentation of the acquired knowledge and the collected data during the project, which is further analyzed and evaluated on the basis of the literature review. A concise conclusion marks the end of the paper.

2 Literature Review

Knowledge is produced through a reflexive social process of mutual understanding and learning from other people. Hence, interacting with others as well as social practices can be regarded as prominent processes in knowledge creation (Frampton, Kinsman, Thompson & Tilleczek, 2006, p. 4). Bennet and Segerberg (2013) describe different forms of collective and connective action networks that allow the dissemination and exchange of knowledge and opinions. In reality, collective and connective actions often co-occur in various forms in the same action ecology or network (p. 45 ff.). This enables social movements and other forms of activism to translate their mission into a clear direction with concrete actions attached. Nowadays, social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook play a vital role in knowledge creation and opinion dissemination. They, for example, allow networks to share personal access to events or promoted actions (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 6). In some cases social movements leverage these developments and build relationships to publics as affiliates rather than as members and offer them personal options for engaging and expressing themselves (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 52). In other words, the non-hierarchical, unbounded and collaborative structure of networks is able to attract activists with different objectives (Canfield, 2018).

In many parts of the world food systems have experienced major changes during the last century. A development from a diet predominantly based on whole foods grown locally to one largely used on foods that have been processed in some way and transported long distances is particularly visible in the United States (Nestle, 2013, p. 11). At the same time, producers and consumers often experience losses in their bargaining powers at the expense of large international distributors (Clapp, 2012, p. 158 ff.). The globalization of the world food economy also leads to a detachment from the societal goals food has traditionally served, such as providing nourishment for people and serving as a cultural medium (Clapp, 2012, p. 167). As a consequence, a great number of ethical food movements, often operating at local levels, are emerging. These articulate values relating to localism, fair trade, organics and environmental sustainability (Lyons, Richards, Desfours & Amati, 2013, p. 158). Counihan and Sinischalchi (2014) define these efforts by people to change the food system across the globe by modifying the way they produce, distribute and/or consume food as food activism (p. 13). Dobernig and Stagl (2015) showed in their research on urban agriculture projects in New York City that many activists' disappointment about the global food system does not lead to engagement in conventional political protests, but rather to a direction of their

attention on areas that they can directly influence (p. 454). For them one of the key factors for a sustainable food system is the reduction of the distance between food production and consumption (Dobernig & Stagl, 2015, p. 453). In connection with these forms of activism most food activists have embraced the concept of the network to reimagine new forms of social and economic organization (Canfield, 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that network organizations serve as a particularly beneficial form of organization when talking about food activism.

Urban agriculture can be considered as a specific form of an ethical food movement. It is particularly interesting, due to its rapid expansion in urban populations and the new spaces and frontiers that it occupies as an emerging social movement (Lyons et al., 2013, p. 158). Urban agriculturalists are creatively challenging traditional and social boundaries, the role of the state as well as the governance of the food system (Lyons et al., 2013, p. 160). McClintock (2014) argues that for many activists, scholars and practitioners urban food production has become a synonym for sustainable, local food systems, challenging the dominant ideology of industrial agriculture (p. 147). One might think that agriculture performed in heavily populated areas is a phenomenon of the 21st century. However, already by the late 19th century, the 1887 Allotments Act and the 1892 Smallholding Act required local authorities in London, UK to provide allotments for the laboring poor. Comparable developments also occurred in Germany with the introduction of the “Schrebergärten”. (Howe, Bohn & Viljonen, 2005, p. 99)

Nowadays, often a critical view and understanding of the dire state of the contemporary food systems including its environmental impacts inspires urban food advocates to take action in the form of urban agriculture (Lyons et al., 2013, p. 161). Whilst some practitioners work on the edges of the mainstream market by supporting initiatives that provide people with an opportunity to understand how their food choices affect broader social and environmental processes, others consider urban agriculture activities as having multiple “yields”, not only in terms of the food being produced, but also in respect of the restoration of degraded environments, the “greening” of the city and reconnecting people and communities. On this account, urban agriculture activists clearly demonstrate how the value of food and food production extend beyond market-based indicators of growth and profit, but instead embody values of knowledge, learning, community, sharing and environmental resources. (Lyons et al., 2013, p. 161)

3 Research Methodology

The research question is addressed with a qualitative approach in which the emphasis lies on understanding, description motives and interpretation (Dirksen, 2019). The methodologies and techniques applied for collecting data as part of this qualitative research are ethnography, interviews and documents.

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that aims to understand certain cultural phenomena. By using ethnography, the researcher reflects the knowledge and meanings that guide the life of cultural groups within their own environment (Gray, 2014, p. 438). While ethnography can be seen as a methodology or strategy for research, participant observation is a specific technique to collect data (Sandiford, 2015). The task of ethnographers is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices of the people in different settings. The main objective is to get inside the way each group of people sees the world (Wilson, 2017, p. 355). This methodology and technique to collect information was applied in an adapted form to answer the research question. A profound description of the observations during the UAB public meeting and the UAB membership application process can be found in Chapter 4 (Field notes in Appendix).

Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences, motives and motivations. The interviewer can obtain in-depth information around the topic. The people interviewed are on the one hand members of the UAB association and on the other hand individuals who participated in the public UAB meeting who have not yet applied for a UAB membership. Two interviews were conducted after the public UAB meeting at the restaurant MILAN in Basel on Tuesday 16th of April. One additional interview was conducted on the phone. The interview method applied was the problem centered interview (Witzel 2000, p. 1). The chosen interview technique is semi-structured in the sense of an interview guide approach. A catalogue of questions in the form of a pre-defined guideline was used, which is oriented to topics and focal points that need to be covered. One important characteristic of an interview guide approach is that the interviewer itself is free to vary the wording and order of the questions to some extent (University of Arizona, 2019), allowing both the interviewer and the person being interviewed the flexibility to go into details when needed (Reis & Judd, 2000, p. 286–287). Helfferich (2011) argues that interviewers in conducting interview guide approach need the ability to find a suitable question formulation under time pressure and spontaneously (p. 12). The fact that spontaneous question formulation requires several skills has also been confirmed in the interviews presented here.

Both the interview guides used and a transcript of the interviews can be found in the appendix.

In the course of the project we consulted official documents of UAB, such as the annual report, statutes and documents from the UAB intranet. Furthermore, the paper discusses literature, which is mainly taken from the bibliography of the lecture or accessible through meta search function of the library of the University of St. Gallen.

A deductive interview analysis was performed based on the transcriptions of the interviews. A deductive analysis is when some views, preliminary studies, reviews of research and theory regarding the topic of interest already exist. Researchers actually begin with theory that afterwards guides the research (Gilgun, 2013, p. 2). In order to extract as much information as possible from the interview transcripts, the open-coding method was used. Key words derived from the interview guidelines and concepts found in the literature were marked in the transcript.

After the profound literature search we were able to stay in contact with UAB for over two months. Most of the communication took place via email. During this period, we physically participated in a public UAB meeting in Basel and conducted three interviews. In order to gain an insight into all projects and the exact processes at UAB, follow-up meetings and a longer time horizon would be needed. Likewise, the three interviews conducted should not be construed as final and complete representations of UAB.

4 Analysis & Findings

UAB is a Swiss association of public utility. UAB's purpose is to promote the production of food, herbs, flowers, crop and medicinal plants to the inhabitants of the city of Basel and its agglomeration (UAB, 2018). The association commits itself to local, social and ecological sustainable goals in order to preserve nature, biodiversity and people. Furthermore, the organization interprets its role as a network of people and organizations that want to act actively or passively within UAB's purpose (UAB, 2019a). By the end of 2018, UAB consisted of 382 members and 70 projects, most of them active. The efforts of UAB's members and supporters to change the food system by modifying the way they produce, distribute and/ or consume food in and around Basel, can be seen as a form of food activism (cf. Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2014, p. 13).

UAB's coordination circle tries to develop a healthy and beneficial environment, in which living beings can develop well. In doing so, an umbrella organization creates a beneficial environment for the living beings, which are the various developing projects (UAB, 2019a). Generally, an umbrella organization is an organization, which controls or organizes the activities of several other organizations, all of which have a similar purpose (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). In the case of UAB, there is a stronger focus on organizing activities and less on controlling. As a decentralized organization, UAB is dependent on an intelligent self-organization of the projects, which strengthens the projects autonomy (UAB, 2019a). The association sees itself as a grass-rooted civil society movement with no link to any religious organization, political party, economical branch or private interest. Besides promoting the production of food, herbs, flowers, crop and medicinal plants, UAB supports the preservation of agricultural usable land and the conversion of land for food production (UAB, 2019a). Grasseni (2014) states that grassroots movements are posing the question of food as a political object of collective deliberation, and they are devising and organizing alternative food provisioning networks that value health and quality standards, but also social and environmental sustainability (p. 179). In this sense, UAB itself and some of its various independent projects can be seen as alternative food networks.

The association desires a versatility of actions and initiatives. For this purpose, the association, as an umbrella organization, creates the required and enabling structures (UAB 2019a). UAB supports projects in various ways and fields like the formation, social integration, intercultural communication, community development, space design, health through movement, health through food security, poverty alleviation, self-sufficiency and

sufficiency security, local economic development, development aid through higher urban degree of self-sufficiency, ecology, biodiversity and climate protection (UAB, 2019a). As Canfield (2018) argues, a non-hierarchical, unbounded and collaborative structure of networks is able to attract activists with different objectives. Thus, the decentralized umbrella organization creates a good basis for achieving the desired diversity.

Sensitized and interested individuals can either apply for membership or directly present their project. Natural and legal persons who recognize the statutes and the mission statement and pay the annual membership fee can become members of UAB (UAB, 2018). The application for membership can be sent via email to “ichbindabei@urbanagriculturebasel.ch”, the application for a project to “kontakt@urbanagriculturebasel.ch”. During our research project, we applied for a membership, which was confirmed on 30th of March 2019 (see Appendix). There are many different motives to join UAB. For some, the UAB movement functions as a complement to global environmental issues that might be more important in today’s world. In this way, the organization, for example, assists people in creating a connection between the food and its origin (Interview with Lila, 2019). For others, it is not primarily the food or its origins that are decisive for membership application or active engagement through a project, but rather the poor quality of the soil in the harbor area of Basel seems to have a large effect on some members’ and non-members’ willingness to get in contact with UAB. For them it is essential to draw attention to the fact that many soils in Basel are contaminated. Personal contacts and proximity to the organization may also be important for the first contact with UAB. (Interview with Michael & Martin, 2019)

UAB’s project diversity that reflects the variety of fields in which the organization is willing to support projects and add them to its network can be considered as one of the most unique characteristics for an urban agriculture movement. This diversity of projects is also perceived by active UAB members (Interview with Lila, 2019). In the same manner, the diverse range of projects naturally attracts people from different social backgrounds as well as people of different gender and age. The diversity in gender and age was even explicitly recognized and mentioned by external participants in the UAB public meeting (Interview with Emily, 2019). During our participant observation at the UAB public meeting on Tuesday evening 16th of April 2019 this diversity was clearly visible. Overall, there were 18 participants including us, thereof ten females and eight males. At the same time, the ages of participants ranged from early twenties to late sixties, more or less equally distributed among the people attending the meeting.

The public meeting took place at the restaurant MILAN in Basel, which is connected to the UAB network and complies with the organization's ethical guidelines. Many of the raw materials used for meals come from UAB's various projects. For example, for the handmade Ravioli mushrooms from the "Stadtpilze" project are utilized. "Stadtpilze" is a project of the UAB network that enables the organic production of edible mushrooms.

The public meeting is held monthly after the board meeting and is promoted on the UAB homepage in the calendar section as well as on Facebook. It can be regarded as a think tank, a contact point for new ideas or a networking point for UAB projects (UAB, 2019a). Like UAB itself, the public meeting is embedded in a kind of network relationship. A sort of community building takes place among the participants, as they can support each other with their concerns. The public meeting thus assumes the function of a connective round of consultation and ideas. Throughout the evening, the atmosphere was very welcoming, relaxed and informal. The evening started with an introductory round in which the participants presented their motives for joining the meeting as well as their questions and concerns. Afterwards, different board members answered the questions and concerns. Sometimes other participants could provide their input and expertise on the discussed topics. Hence, we can observe that UAB, through its public meetings, is able to build relationships and leverage them for the benefit of the different participants. In other words, the public meetings play a similar role like social media, as they facilitate knowledge creation and opinion dissemination (cf. Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 6). Although there exists the possibility to become a member of the organization, UAB clearly enables non-members to express themselves and offer them personal options for engaging that do not require active membership (cf. Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 52).

As the participants themselves, their motives and questions were extremely varied. To underline this, a selection of participants and their motives are further outlined.

A young chef called Tobias who wants to open his own restaurant in the city of Basel in the next few weeks participated the meeting. His intention is to use only raw materials produced in and around the city of Basel for cooking. He joined the meeting, because he would like to know from UAB how and where he could obtain these food products. He was recommended to take a look at the menu of the MILAN, as there are many local food producers listed from which the MILAN obtains its raw materials. He was also given the contact details of a chef who also has experience in this field. Tobias is not yet a member of UAB and has never been in contact with UAB before.

The following participants' motives were twofold. Martin and Michael have been given a larger plot of 600 m² near the border to Germany in the area of the harbor. Their ultimate goal is to grow food for their own use on this cultivation area. At the moment, the plot is in a very bad condition and as a sample showed it is heavily contaminated with heavy metals. As a result, their second goal is to get insights from UAB whether there are plants that can reduce the soil's contamination. There were a variety of solutions given by the public meeting participants. Martin and Michael were recommended to start a cooperation with the University of Basel. In addition, there would be the possibility to document the degradation of soil pollutants within the framework of a newly initiated UAB project. Critical voices, however, also pointed to the potential high costs that would be incurred for necessary inspections and measures. Michael is already a passive member of UAB, because he likes the concept of UAB, but may now want to play a more active role by implementing his own project (Interview with Martin & Michael, 2019).

Emily is a graphic designer from Basel and is currently looking for an activity in her leisure time as a balance to her professional life. She participated in the public meeting, because she wanted to know about the different opportunities to get involved with UAB. The board members advised her to check the variety of different projects listed on UAB's homepage and directly get in contact with the contact person of a suitable project. Additionally, the board members indicated that for certain projects the response time might be longer than for others, because the email account is not regularly maintained.

A relaxed get-together with networking opportunities at the bar of the restaurant MILAN with free beer complemented the public meeting of UAB.

Having described the diversity of public meeting participants and their motives, the variety of projects is equally fascinating and important when analyzing UAB. Across all projects, UAB expects from its members a production of food that is in line with the guidelines of Bio Suisse (2019a). One project that definitely implements these guidelines is the association "Lokaler Wirz". Through the association volunteers join forces to cultivate vegetables according to seasonal, local and biological standards. The objective of the project is to encourage to think about nutrition and food and show that ecological and sustainable agriculture is possible in a fast-paced city like Basel. (UAB, 2019a)

Another project that highlighted the sustainable urban food production as well as the direct producer to consumer link is the "Keinkaufswagen" action. In total 230 discarded shopping carts were utilized as a vessel to plant vegetables or herb seedlings. People that participated in the action were able to take home the shopping cart and use it as a small cultivation area.

(UAB, 2019b; Interview with Michael & Martin, 2019) This closed project efficaciously displays the implicitness that the majority of the food being produced will be in a shopping cart of a consumer at a certain point in time. We can definitely see that some projects within the UAB-network challenge traditional and social boundaries as well as the contemporary food system itself in a quite creative way (cf. Lyons et al., 2013, p. 160).

Dobering and Stagl (2015) show that for urban agriculturalists in New York City one of the key factors for a sustainable food system is the reduction of the distance between food production and consumption (p. 453). This finding definitely also applies to members engaging in projects of UAB. One project that exemplifies that is the “Lebensmittel Netzwerk Basel” which was started in 2018. The main objective of this project is the linkage of different actors of the local food industry in Basel, such as the agriculture, the processing- and retail business and the gastronomy. This aims at the promotion of a regional direct trade. Besides periodic network meetings, the action group works on the further development of an online platform for direct trade and the establishment of two logistic hubs, which allow supply and demand to be coordinated and to optimize administrative processes. (UAB, 2019c)

Members perceive the range of different projects as broadly diversified (Interview with Lila, 2019). Additionally, it has to be indicated that there seems to be no preferential treatment for certain projects. All initiatives appear to have the same support and priority from the coordination circle perspective. The impact and attraction of regional attention seem to be mainly dependent on the engagement of the people launching and spearheading a project. However, the “Gemeinschaftsgarten Landhof” project might have a unique standing within the whole of initiatives, especially when it comes to public recognition of UAB. Right after the establishment of UAB, when the stock of different projects was not as extensive as today, the “Gemeinschaftsgarten Landhof” project, initiated by UAB together with the city market garden of Basel in 2011, had a particularly high profile (Interview with Lila, 2019). As of today, the project is still active. The initiative “Gemeinschaftsgarten Landhof” stands for the return of gardens into the city and for an urban agriculture as well as for the notion “local food for local people” (UAB, 2019d). Shortly after realizing their project the people engaged identified that the community garden is less of a basis for self-sufficiency, but more of a location for a sociocultural sensitization and a place to exchange knowledge on gardening (UAB, 2019a).

The participants of the UAB public meeting mentioned the notion of sensitization, especially when it came to the role and mission of UAB. The main task of UAB can be described through a constant sensitization process that touches on different areas of our environment

such as the quality of the soil or the origin of the food we eat (Interview with Michael & Martin, 2019). Emily mentioned the sensitization concerning the production process of food as an essential legitimization for the existence of UAB (Interview with Emily, 2019). Besides the concept of sensitization, the social aspect of UAB and its projects was highlighted by the people interviewed. Lila emphasized the need for more offers regarding locations in the city where people can get in contact with green and soil together with other human beings as an important objective for a city like Basel (Interview with Lila, 2019). Even Emily, the interview partner that had not got in contact with UAB prior to the public meeting, revealed that for her the social aspect of UAB-projects is very fascinating (Interview with Emily, 2019). Hence, the sensitization of the community constitutes a major component of the activities and initiatives UAB undertakes that are also perceived by its members and non-members. One example that illustrates the work on sensitization of the community is the project “2000 m² Weltacker”. According to the motto “Mein Essen wächst nicht im Supermarkt” more than 18 school classes were received on the acre in 2018 (UAB, 2019a). Furthermore, we can state that for participants of an organization like UAB the possibility of social interactions among the people engaged in the same or across different projects captures an essential argument for the investment of their time and effort into the various urban agriculture projects. Along these two features of social interaction and sensitization UAB is able to stimulate the process of knowledge creation in different areas connected to urban agriculture (cf. Frampton et al., 2006, p. 4).

According to Frich (2016), the co-founder of UAB, UAB is based on the idea that town people can do more than uncritically consume what wholesalers place on the shelves of discounters. It is about finding urban niches, producing our own food, joining together to solidarity-based contract farming projects and learning and discussing what kind of agriculture we want. Consequently, this would strengthen regional value chains. (p. 91) Nevertheless, in UAB’s annual report the organization emphasizes the need to deal with the fact that UAB’s vision and the daily lives partly diverge. In order to digest this reality gap it is necessary to focus not only outwards, on the “outer garden”, but also inwards, on the “inner garden”, because peace, cooperation and change start at oneself. (UAB, 2019a) This observation also coincides with some statements made in the interviews. Although we know that tomatoes are not a vegetable seasonable during the winter months, we still take it for granted to buy and consume them during winter time (Interview with Michael & Martin, 2019).

All in all, we can definitely state that UAB as an organization as well as its different projects have multiple “yields”. Not only in terms of the food being produced, but also in respect to the restoration of degraded environments, the “greening” of the city and reconnecting people and communities UAB, as shown throughout the variety of different projects described in this chapter, contributes to changing the food system to a more equal and social habitat for all of its actors. Additionally, the organization as well as the people linked to it, such as the interview participants for this project, clearly demonstrate how the value of food and food production extend beyond market-based indicators of growth and profit, but instead embody values of knowledge, learning, community, sharing and environmental resources. (cf. Lyons et al., 2013, p. 161)

5 Conclusion

To conclude, the organizational structure of UAB as a decentralized umbrella organization entails multiple benefits. The fact that it creates an open and corporative environment, in which issues of various sorts are effectively addressed, can be specified as one distinct advantage. In this way, the organization provides fertile grounds for knowledge exchange and problem-solving approaches regarding the production of sustainable foods. Additionally, the structure of an umbrella organization helps to foster diversity. The amount and range of different projects of UAB mirrors the diversity facilitated by the umbrella organization. Most projects encourage and/or facilitate the production of sustainable foods in a direct or indirect way. “Lokaler Wirz”, as a project that directly promotes the production of sustainable foods, allows volunteers to cultivate vegetables according to seasonal, local and biological standards. Furthermore, the project’s objective is to illustrate that ecological and sustainable production of food is feasible in large Swiss cities.

The variety of projects and the open and corporative environment attract people from different social backgrounds as well as people of different gender and age. Hence, all activists’ motives for engaging and/or joining the organization are manifold as well. UAB can be considered as a complement to global environmental issues by assisting the population in creating a connection between the food and its origin and at the same time be perceived as an access point regarding answers to local ecological issues. For Michael and Martin this local issue manifests itself through the intoxication of their allotment garden. UAB provides knowledge, guidance and possible documentation of the renaturalization process through a project launch.

Lastly, the people engaging with UAB identify a need of constant sensitization that touches on different areas of our environment. One of these fields in need of sensitization constitutes the production process of food. By providing a complement to global environmental concerns, access points for local ecological issues and sensitization across various facets of our environment UAB, as a non-hierarchical and collaborative structure, stimulates the process of knowledge creation in different areas containing urban agriculture.

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