

Report on Participation in Field Research Trip to Germany and the Netherlands

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Urban Agriculture: Farming as a means to re-socialise

During the Overseas Field Research Trip in the Netherlands, our group visited a farm called Lindenhoff. Admittedly, I was not very interested at first as I thought it was another organic or environmentally friendly farm that can be easily found in economically 'developed' countries. However, their hiring practices and treatment of workers were different – drug addicts, alcoholics and other socially 'unfit' individuals such as the homeless worked there. It was used as a re-socialisation facility by providing these people with opportunities to earn money legally and rightfully and to take responsibility for their actions. Fascinated by this process, I decided to research further about urban agriculture and community farming and how these are used as methods to encourage re-socialisation.

Social isolation is one of the major reasons in the discipline of sociology that can enhance crime. Wilson understands social isolation as the disjuncture between the interpersonal social networks of members of a certain society. He specifically mentions the underclass, a concept developed by Charles Murray, as individuals who suffer from social isolation because of their poverty and the lack of involvement with welfare or public assistance. (Harrell and Peterson 1992) Brian Barry, a political theorist with a Marxist background argues that the concept 'social exclusion' no longer solely embodies the notions of economic deprivation but also social disconnection of certain groups or individuals. (Barry 1998)

In order for alienated individuals to be re-socialised, not only their income must be secured – although undoubtedly, this is an important aspect. Social isolation can be tackled through communication and interaction with other members of society, which can be described, also, as social capital.

Urban agriculture can provide job opportunities for socially isolated individuals such as drug abusers, alcoholics, the homeless or the 'underclass' (or low-income individuals/groups) with wages which is rewarded for their work and opportunities to interact with others therefore it aims to solve the fundamental aspects of social isolation. Additionally, agricultural techniques learned at farms are life skills that are necessary for future as many of these socially excluded individuals do not have any skills to turn to. This is one of the main reasons as to why criminals tend to re-commit crimes. As it was discussed in the interview of Harry Rhodes, a criminal gave himself six months to either find a steady job or go back to dealing drugs as a means of surviving. Urban agriculture provides an alternative path to criminal lifestyle or addiction.

Using farming as a means for re-socialisation has been attempted in many countries including the United States and Brazil and they have been extremely successful. Because the US government must financially support organisations that work with the homeless, Harry Rhodes founded Growing Home that helps homeless and low-income individuals to survive in this market-oriented society. By teaching work and life skills composed of 'horticulture, marketing, customer relations, health and nutrition and life skills' (financial

skills and budgeting), participants of Growing Home have a safe environment where they can secure their income and be rewarded for their work.¹

Another example can be found in Brazil, in the city of Juiz de Fora, state of Minas Gerais, where due to alcohol and drug abuse, urban violence and environmental degradation, many individuals are socially excluded. Working with the Agricultural and Food Supply Bureau and the INTECOOP (Technology Incubator of Popular Cooperatives of the University), this project offered participants opportunities to learn about theoretical and practical aspects about crops and farming techniques and they also produce countless types of vegetables which gives them a satisfaction of work and more importantly, social participation and a feeling of achievement through economic production. The cost of such programme is not as expensive as one might imagine. A group consists of thirty participants who are chosen every year and it costs approximately \$29,500 per year. (Nolasco 2009)

Therefore, for many of these participants, urban agricultural projects provided a way of life and a possibility to lead a life that is not self-destructive. Additionally, Lindenhoff's project has a particular value because it also gives participants individuality and independence as well as a sense of responsibility. Although many of its workers require re-socialisation process and can be regarded as 'untrustworthy', they are treated as any other workers. They do not have restrictions on how they spend their income or what they do after work. If they wish, they can go buy alcohol or drugs with their money as it is considered to be 'their choice'. However, with hard work, the value of money is reconsidered among workers and as they no longer are socially, culturally and economically marginalised, it is less likely that they will go back to their old habits.

What was of particular interest to me was the responsibility that Lindenhoff places on its workers. Albeit workers may start with a simple task, such as collecting chicken eggs in the beginning, if they do a good job, they can be responsible for more important and complex tasks such as taking care of chickens and managing the chicken farm. This increase of work responsibility can be seen as trust building exercise and, again, it encourages slow and gradual changes in workers' lives in a positive way.

These types of projects have shown that urban agriculture can be a salient aspect of reducing social and economic vulnerability as well as social estrangement. These participants do not simply grow crops but the projects provide work, income, increased self-esteem and according to Nolasco (2009:33) 'citizenship to those who once had nothing'. This is not to argue that using urban agriculture as a means for re-socialisation will be perfect without any problems – because of freedom given to the workers, as it is done at Lindenhoff, rehabilitation may be more successful for addicts. However, it is absolutely salient to give socially isolated people an opportunity to understand their own problems and voluntarily try to change their current situation. In this sense, urban agriculture has not only solved social isolation in terms of economic sense but also in social and cultural aspects.

Because of this trip, which was extensively interesting and widely educating, I became more interested in European agriculture and how it is used for social and economic problems. It was fascinating to see the farm focused on re-socialisation first hand. Additionally, I am more motivated to study in various different environments, as I would get the opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds. I had an amazing time at Erasmus University where I could socialise with graduate students studying there and the experience helped me to encourage me to communicate with people from different educational training and disciplines. The overseas programme was not only educational as it gave me a chance to visit universities and agricultural places such as farms (Lindenhoff), manufacturers (Brandt & Levie) and organisations (SOMO and FIAN) that I had not before. Agriculture in Europe was not only concerned vis-à-vis food security but for other

social issues that is widely prevalent in many societies around the world and it was an opportunity for me to once again realise the importance of agriculture in our everyday lives.

References

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