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GARDENING IS ABOUT PEOPLE!

CASE STUDIES ABOUT URBAN GARDENING IN BRUSSELS BETWEEN COMMONS AND DEGROWTH

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OSSERVATORIO CORES - WORKING PAPER SERIES 3:2013

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www.unibg.it/cores

Abstract

Although urban-gardening is not recent (the first- the Liz Christy Community Garden- grew up in Manhattan in 1973) urban-gardens are getting more and more presents all around Europe and their importance as a matter of resilience is notably growing. This paper is part of research plan (in progress) on the idea of commons in social movements involved in degrowth, re-appropriation of city spaces and based on participation and cooperation; furthermore, because of the connection between urban-gardening, resilience and degrowth, this presentation belongs to larger and a particularly timing analysis on commons and degrowth. The specific aim of this contribution is to present how the idea of commons is part of the discourse of urban-gardeners in Brussels. In fact the discourse about the commons is increasingly relevant in the political and social arena and it seems to be permeating different fields of activism. Despite its importance, however it is yet not defined and the interaction between different disciplines can contribute to its development. Urban-gardens, and Brussels' ones particularly, offer good material: on the one hand urban-gardening is an "old" social experience where the idea of commons is recently incorporated, which makes paradoxically easier to understand how and why it became relevant; on the other hand Brussels is a perfect location because of the high number of gardens and because of his peculiar international but also local condition. The idea of commons among Brussels urban-gardeners, explored thanks to the data collected, will be presented, analyzed in relation to different approaches and, when possible, compared with information coming from other cases.

1. Introductory aspects

This paper aims to analyze some specificity of urban gardening, focusing of Brussels experiences and to verify its main features. The idea behind the study is that these experience can be connected with the debate about the commons. Some guide lines are to be traced in order to define the state of the art and the framework where this research is conducted.

This topic is in fact quite relevant in the context of social movements and, on the other hand, urban gardens are gaining a significant role and are attracting more and more academic and political interest. Urban gardening is indeed definitely increasing in Europe and some connections have been identified between this increase and the economic crisis.

In order to develop the argumentation of this study it is necessary to proceed step by step: first defining deeply the object itself, the urban gardens, and then providing useful information about the debate about the commons and its development.

Notwithstanding the long tradition of this social experience the boom occurred during the last 10 years is particularly significant since it is related to some relevant change in paradigms and features.

The first recognized urban garden, the Liz Crhisty Community Garden was established in Manhattan in 1973 and the practice of urban or community gardening began to spread in United States and, some years later, in Australia.

It is therefore consistent with this scenario that most of the studies about urban gardens deals with American and Australian cases; however even in these Countries a variety of typologies of gardens exists. Indeed United States as in Europe different motivations and different contexts led to different structures of gardens, nevertheless some points in common existed: i. e. interest in healthy food and in re-imagination of urban space.

The European scenario became more and more interesting during the last twenty years and urban gardening grew remarkably during the last ten years: in Brussels for example there are now about 40 gardens and several others exist around Belgium. All these gardens have different features, characteristics and rules but they share common characteristics.

This study analyzes three gardens whose stories, contexts and outcomes are quite different but which provide, thanks to a comparison among them, an interesting overview about the motivations of gardeners, the connection with social and political debates (as about commons and degrowth) and eventually the effects that the presence of an urban garden produces on urban and social environment.

It is a working paper because the research on urban gardening and commons aims to be much more exhaustive: it will therefore cover a higher number of gardens and will be continued thanks to further interviews with gardeners, their neighbors and the municipal authorities.

For now, however, these three stories already offer a sufficient amount of interesting data.

2. Urban community gardening: a long history of good practices

Despite urban gardening is now a very common phenomenon its origins are quite old as we have already underlined about the Liz Christy Garden of Manhattan. However, what is particularly interesting is the variety of motivations for participating in these experiences and the appearance of new motivations in the last years.

Among the “traditional” reasons motivating the choice of participating or establishing an urban garden, some key words can be identified such as environment, health, reshape urban landscape.

The Liz Christy Garden¹, for example, aimed to restore an abandoned piece of New York City and was established by a bottom-up action of Liz Christy, a local resident of the neighborhood (to whom the garden was eventually dedicated 10 years after) and a group of green activists, named Green Guerrillas.

Some other gardens are “food-oriented”, often following somehow the historical tradition of the Liberty and Victory Gardens built particularly in the United States (where the phenomenon was much present) and in the United Kingdom during World War I and II. Sometimes these gardens, which are usually relatively big and able to produce a significant amount of food, are based in the same plots that used to be Victory Gardens or, similarly, in places where the *cités-jardins* were originally developed.

This focus on food, which could appear as the most logical motivation for people to gather together in a garden, belongs, on the contrary, to a set of key topics that gained more relevance in the last decades.

It is particularly true for US and Australia-based gardening experiences: indeed, the concept of health is increasingly related to an attention for

¹ For further information about the Liz Christy Garden see: www.lizchristygarden.us

organic food. Some of the gardeners, therefore, are particularly motivated by an interest for organic consumption, but at a lower price.

Earlier in the story of urban gardening the main motivation was to restore green spaces in the cities.

Among the wide range of motivations educational, social and/or cultural issues are also quite present, both in United States and in Europe.

3. Which kind of gardens? Definitions and key topics

In order to properly discuss about these “unconventional” gardening it would also be useful to specify the different nuances used to define these experiences: there is for example a different distribution of the use of the word “community” and of the word “urban” in order to refer to the gardens.

Although they are often combined these two adjectives define different features of a garden and their distribution is anything but not uniform around the world. “Community gardening” is the favored term in United States², Canada, Australia and New Zealand which are also the Countries where, as already underlined, the phenomenon has been studied the most.

Of course when a piece of land gardened by a group of people is named, by these same people, as “community” or as a “urban” garden its definition focus on a specific feature: on the one hand the role of community involved and, on the other hand, the spacial position of such a piece of land.

Furthermore similar differences exist in other European languages. For instance, in Spain they are called “huertos urbanos” or “huertos sociales”, in French (with slight differences between Belgium and France) two options of definition exist “potager”, literally “vegetable garden”, and “jardin”, literally “garden” to be combined with three possible adjectives: collectif (collective), urbain (urban), and partagé (shared). Eventually in Italian there are “orti urbani”, “orti collettivi” and, more rarely, “orti sociali”. These differences, although very subtle, reflect a variety in practical organisation and theoretical inspiration of these gardens. As we will see more specifically analysing some Brussels gardens a difference in the organisational structure correspond to a difference in gardeners approach. And, although it is not obvious at first sight, these various approaches are consistent with the debate about the commons.

As previously described a combination of topics and needs is to be taken into account in describing urban/community gardens and such a general

² For US community Gardening experience see: http://treebranch.org/community_gardens.htm

framework is confirmed by the interviews conducted in Brussels. It is possible to organize them by category: environment and food, education and learning, social bounds and city-life.

Concepts belonging to all these categories are present at different level and are expressed with different nuances during the interviews or by formal and informal publications (including blogs and websites). But the most remarkable aspect is that they are strongly connected.

As for environmental and food issues the importance of eating organic and healthy food is interrelated with the ecological approach dealing with local production as a reaction against land exploitation. As for the educational aspects the agricultural skills are cited along with the recuperation of ancient local traditions and with more general topics dealing with multicultural exchange and integration. The latter provides the link towards the third category which includes different ideas, from sharing to the redefinition of urban space, from collectivism to social inclusion and creation of bounds among neighbors. Recently, with the effects of the economic crisis getting more and more serious, both in United States and in Europe, the idea of reacting thanks to such a form of autonomous farming is becoming increasingly present.

Consistently with the vocation of gardens as places that create links among people these experiences become being interconnected at local as well as at regional or national scale. Various can be the scopes of such a networking: exchange of competences, seeds and ideas, technical and logistical support, media coverage and interaction with public authorities. The specific features of each network changes from one Country to another.

4. Commons: a recent topic with a long story

In order to develop a study focusing on the connection between the idea of commons and urban gardening experiences we need to explain what we refer too when talking about commons and what is the state of the art about such a complex topic.

Commons are a topic which is far from being unanimously established since different approaches have been used to study it and the connection with the analysis about urban gardening appears at first sight far from being obvious; nevertheless community or urban gardening experiences began to be quoted in connection with the commons, as it is the case, for

example of a recent publication issued by the Council of Europe dealing with Human Rights and Poverty³.

So many different disciplines can deal with such a topic that it presents, therefore, a wide range of possible approaches: however, and in order to simplify, the most concerned scholars are jurists, social scientists and economists. Such a debate, however, is strictly related to current political elaboration both at informal and formal level. As for the first a lot of grassroots movements included the idea of commons in their documents and actions; as for the latter the interest for the commons is gaining relevance at European political level as demonstrate, for example, the above-quoted publication.

Historically speaking the first scientific text debating the commons is the well-known paper by G. Hardin⁴ entitled “The tragedy of the commons” issued in 1968. Afterward the topic gained progressive attention in economics and political sciences. A second turn of high attention paid to this topic occurred when E. Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in an Economics in 2009 because of her studies on economic governance which can be considered as in explicit opposition to Hardin's theory. Both the studies and approaches deserve a few more words.

Although his goal was to expose a theory about overpopulation Hardin's article became the turning point for criticisms against common-land use (even though, in fact, he describes open-access resources rather than commonly owned ones). The theory of the tragedy of the commons can be summarized as follows: considered a group of shepherds and a piece of land without any kind of enclosure or property limit each shepherd will try to get the highest advantage from the land overusing it in order to feed his herd. As a final result the land will be affected by such an overuse and the whole group will loose.

It is easily to imagine how such an analysis has been largely used in order to support and defend private property as an economic engine. Along the years this theory has been contested with different arguments by various scholars: the most celebrated opposition is represented by the researches conducted by E. Ostrom and particularly her book “Governing the Commons” (1990) which gained further attention in the academic and political arena after she won the Nobel Prize in Economics.

3 Cfr. *Vivre en dignité au XXIème siècle. Pauvreté et inégalité dans les sociétés de droits humains*. Council of Europe-provisional version Feb. 2013

4 Hardin G., *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in *Science*, 162, 13 Dec., pp. 1243- ss. 1968

E. Ostrom and her team, though, began their researches at the end of the sixties and conducted this study over a very long period. The cases covered were especially focused on natural common-pool resources. These studies demonstrated that concrete experiences of common-pool resources management based on cooperation and specific arrangements exist when and where the role of both the State and the Market is limited or absent⁵.

They also pointed out that the management of resources as commons represents a valid alternative, in certain specific cases, both to the public and the private option. Ostrom's research was characterized by an high interdisciplinary approach in terms of factors and of disciplines, involving economics, politics, sociology and anthropology. In fact the structures analyzed are much more than just practical or economical choices but involve the community at different level and therefore, needed such a combination of disciplines to be analyzed.

Much earlier in the seventies another article, dealing with common property, underlined the differences between “common owned resources” and “unowned resources”⁶ making references to some ancient law concepts that would actually deserve further attention (*res communes* and *res nullius*). The authors Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop, also underlined that “Common property is not 'everybody's property' ” and “economists are not free to use the concept 'common property resources' or 'commons' under conditions where no institutional arrangements exist”⁷.

On the basis of this double approach two basic features are to be retained in order to proceed with the analysis of specific cases: on the one hand open-access and commonly owned resources are to be distinguished, on the other hand some key concepts have been identified in the governing of commons. Among them trust, responsibility, complexity and social relationship.

Despite the topic cannot be considered as new, the interest for the commons gained a relevant importance in the last ten years both in the political and in the scientific arena (as demonstrates the quite late translation in Italian and in French of Ostrom's, respectively in 2006⁸ and 2010⁹). With the remarkable exception of Italy the concept of “commons”

5 Ostrom E., *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge- New York, 1990

6 Ciriacy-Wantrup S.V., Bishop R.C., *Common Property as a concept in natural resources policy*, in *Natural Resources Journal* 15, pp.713-ss.

7 *Ivi* p. 715

8 Ostrom E., *Governare i beni collettivi*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2006

9 Ostrom E., *La gouvernance des biens communs : Pour une nouvelle approche des ressources naturelles* ; Ed. De Boeck, 2010

is still rather marginal in civil society and grassroots movements. It is therefore not strange that for the Belgian context that is to be presented in this paper such topic is quite unfamiliar. However, as I am aiming to point out, the lack in definition doesn't imply a lack in practices.

Eventually a step back to the distinction made by Ciricy-Wantrup and Bishop can be useful. The scholars refer to two categories belonging to the the Roman legal system of classification of things: both the terms, *res communes* and *res nullius*, are extremely meaningful since the first one implies, for its etymology (*cum-munis*), the idea of reciprocity and communal responsibility, while the second one refers to things and goods that belonging to none (*nullius*) and therefore appropriable by anyone. Both are rival goods but only the *res communes* are not excludable. The debate about *res nullius* and *res communes* is for some extents still open but this a relevant distinction exists between them, and it is based on the role and the responsibilities of individuals.

Such a sort of summary of the debate about the commons provided a general framework and some key words to keep in mind for the next steps.

5. Brussels: practices, bureaucracy and funds

As for the general framework of the history of urban gardening a quick overview of the situation of urban gardening in Brussels provides useful information as a very last step before describing the results of this research.

There are about 30 gardens in the city of Brussels and in the Wallon Region, and many other similar experiences exist in Flanders. Since 2006 their presence is constantly increasing and more and more systematized, thanks to a stronger coordination with associations dealing with the topic and to a productive interaction with public authorities and institutions.

Compared with other Countries, indeed, the connection and in some case the collaboration, between urban gardeners and institutions is well established and developed under different forms.

In Brussels an association called “Début des Haricots” provides logistical and technical support for the creation of an urban garden (including proper agricultural advices and follow-up), coordination and facilitation support inside the groups of gardeners as well as in networking processes among urban gardens. The latter activity also includes forms of political support and mediation with the Institutions.

On the institutional side different possibilities for supporting the creation or the maintenance of urban gardens exist: the “Contrat de

Quartier”, the call for projects funded by Bruxelles Environment¹⁰ (public institution for Environment and Energy for the Brussels-Capital Region) or in the framework of “Quartiers Verts”¹¹ (joint project of the Ministry of Environment and Inter-environnement Bruxelles), by the Municipalities themselves, as part of the activities of their Department of Sustainable Development (Services de Développement Durable) and in the framework of Agenda21 funding procedures.

As for the so-called “Contrat de Quartier” (whose proper name is “Contrat de Quartier Durable”¹², i. e. Sustainable Neighborhood Contract) it is a plan of action, limited in time and space, that aims to develop good sustainable local practices in a specific neighborhood.

It involves and is signed by the Region, the Municipality (Brussels is divided in 19 Municipalities) and the inhabitants of a neighborhood and establishes a program of interventions to be realized with a predefined budget. Among these actions urban gardening often have a relevant role.

Beside Agenda 21, Bruxelles Environment, that since 2011 funds projects of urban gardening (for one year) and the Quartier Verts project (existing since 12 years), some private or semi-private foundations sometimes support urban gardening in the framework of specific projects. It is the case for example of the Fondation Roi Badouin¹³, with the project “Quartier de vie”¹⁴ and of the Fondation Promethea¹⁵ with the Prix Broucsella¹⁶.

Different smaller organizations and ASBL (i.e. associations sans but lucratif) offer other kind of support to the creation of an urban community garden.

Most of the urban gardens in Brussels are officially recognized and have signed a “convention d'occupation” with the owner of the plot, either a private or a public entity. Furthermore a “charter of the garden” describes rules, duties and functioning of the garden itself and gardeners are required to sign it in almost every case.

10 www.bruxellesenvironnement.be

11 www.quartiersverts.be

12 www.quartiers.irisnet.be/fr/contrats-de-quartiers-durables

13 www.kbs-frb.be

14 <http://www.kbs-frb.be/call.aspx?id=293261&langtype=2060>

15 www.promethea.be

16 <http://www.promethea.be/Evenements-et-activites/bruocsella/prix-bruocsella-2010/prix-de-25000>

6. Brussels and its gardens

Once the bureaucratic issues illustrated it is time to move deeply into the specific cases studied in order to highlight if and how these experiences interact with the ideas of commons and with the degrowing approach.

These three gardens well represent the variety of organisational options of Brussels urban gardening. A garden can be shared (*partagé*) or collective (*collectif*): in the first case the gardeners share the land but they have individual parcels, while in *collectif* gardens there are no individual parcels. It produces of course a difference in terms of access to the vegetables produced.

Sometimes just the inhabitants of the neighborhood can be accepted as participants and the garden is therefore defined as *jardin de quartier*. The rule concerning the limitation to neighbors applies more or less strictly depending if it is part of an agreement with the “Commune” or not; the connection with the municipality, in fact, can be more or less strong according to various factors.

Although almost all the gardens are open to public and visitors many of them have precise rules about the acceptance of new gardeners. More practically the high majority of the gardens are locked in order to avoid vandalism.

Generally speaking the higher is the connection with the neighborhood the higher is the involvement in other parallel social activities dealing with different issues from social integration to education.

On the other hand the most the garden is collectively managed the most it is open to other participants who generally have an higher level of political engagement.

Indeed the political engagement of the participants to such gardening experiences is less uniform than one can imagine: as we will see some are even political representatives at the municipal level or active members of a political party while others define themselves as not involved in any political or social activity.

Velt Koekelberg- Koekelberg

It is a recently established garden but the process of its creation began in 2011 under the pressure of a group of inhabitants. Indeed this case deals with the interaction between personal and community interests. That is the story: the garden is in an highly urbanized area where most of the buildings

are council houses. In order to avoid the creation of a ghetto the Commune promoted social cohesion offering the possibility to people not having such a lodging right to rent or buy apartments in that area at lower rates. The result is that people from other areas, belonging to specific social categories, moved to this part of the city. At some point in 2011 one of the inhabitants belonging to this group discovered that a new building was planned...exactly in front of her window! Therefore she decided to propose an alternative plan to the Commune. In order to do so she began talking with other inhabitants trying to figure out how this new plan could look like: that's how the idea of the garden rose.

First of all it was necessary to convince the Commune to stop the building project, then the inhabitants presented the project of a *jardin de quartier*; all the bureaucratic steps have been covered in about two years.

In the meanwhile the neighbors involved began meeting each-other, they planned about the structure and the management of the future garden and some got involved in parallel environmental projects. In April 2013 they got the keys of "their" garden.

Summarizing its main features Velt Koekelberg is a neighborhood community garden in an highly urbanized and multicultural area. The presence of council houses is also significant for the description. Only the inhabitants of the neighborhood can sign the charter and actively participate; it is possible to have private parcels but a shared part exist. Although these are the very first steps it is clear that food production is extremely relevant in this case.

The garden is closed by a gate of which most of the gardeners have the keys. As for now there are about 50 people participating.

Jardin Marjorelle- Moelenbeek

The *Jardin Marjorelle* is a rather original experience because of its story, its context and its features. Compared with Velt Koekleberg it definitely smaller and less food-oriented. It is indeed more an instrument than an a goal itself. Created in 2010, it is the final step of a long process begun in 2005 whose goal was conceptually far from creating a garden.

In fact a group families was looking for better housing options and, thanks to some local organisations, it got involved in a project of passive building. Bureaucratically and technically complex it took 5 years for the families to take possession of the passive building, named Residence l'Espoir. The group of inhabitants is definitely mixed, including ten different nationalities over fourteen families for a total amount of 78

people, 49 of which are children; the neighborhood in which the passive building is situated is very multicultural too and, being built on originally state-owned land, it is in front of a council house.

This location is part of the reason that pushed the inhabitants to create a garden: their goal was to create a connection with people living in the council houses in front of them who were, not strangely, disappointed because of the remarkable difference between their grey, tall and sad building and the new colored and fancy one.

In fact the garden was created exactly in between the two buildings as a sort of bridge between them. Notwithstanding a leading role of the inhabitants of *L'Espoir* in its creation it actually also involves people living in front, in council houses. Furthermore it eventually became a center of attraction for many activities in the neighborhood.

Despite its small size, in terms of land and medium size in terms of participants (basically people living at *L'Espoir* – between 20 and 30 - plus some others from the neighborhood (five families more or less) its social vocation works perfectly in such a context.

This garden cannot exactly be considered as *jardin de quartier* because on the one hand it involves the inhabitants of two buildings but, on the other hand, it is not exclusive: people from other part of the city are in theory welcome to take part to the project.

Jardin Collectif de Tour et Taxis

This last garden presents substantial differences both in terms of context and of organisation. It is not located in a particularly connoted area: although it is less central than the other two it is relatively more mixed in terms of social background and range of age of the participants and, eventually, it is open to everyone with no restriction. Although more oriented to food production than the second this aspect cannot be considered as exclusive as the garden presents an ample part only dedicated to flowers. Furthermore it is by principle collective so there are no individual parcels.

As for the property of the land it is built on a plot owned by a private so the “convention d'occupation” is in this case signed by the gardeners and a single individual. The Municipality is therefore not involved except for some bureaucratic aspects.

The garden has been created in 2008 just as an idea of some people remarking a plot of land abandoned. Some of the gardeners live close by but many others live far from the garden where they normally go on Sunday, that is also the day when the garden is open to visitors.

People with different backgrounds and age are involved in the project but, as a general consideration, the educational and professional level, as well as the political and social engagement, is higher among these gardeners.

7. The survey (technical aspects)

These three gardens have been chosen because of their specific features that make them representative of different kind of urban gardening and because of their availability to take part to the study.

The survey consisted in a set of questions focusing on the garden and on the individuals. Personal motivation and approach to the garden have been investigated. The gardeners have also been asked to take part to a brainstorming exercise about four key words: crisis, growth, sharing and commons.

The results of this research are based on the interaction between the data collected during this survey and the context described above.

As for the connection with the debate about the commons it is definitely not explicit but the answers collected offer a context consistent with the debate as it is; to some extents the data provide interesting keys for the analysis of the commons.

8. More people than vegetables!

It can be sustained that although it might appear strange at first sight vegetables are less present than people are.

Answering to questions related to motivations, definitions and positive aspects most of the respondents mentioned people more than nature and vegetables.

Friendship, interaction with neighbors, reciprocal learning, cultural diversity and networking are approximately half of the motivations for joining the garden and more than two thirds of the concepts used in describing the garden itself.

Furthermore when asked about positive aspects of the experience the gardeners reported ideas as opportunities for children and youth, learning and increase of positive attitudes toward society (energy, enthusiasm, social change....).

In theory such an high importance given to the “people” compared with the vegetables (which are however often mentioned) could be explained considering that none of the three gardens studied produce a sufficient amount of food to actually make the gardeners independent from other forms of distribution. Indeed as already underlined the production of good could cover one quarter of one family needs for the garden in Tour et Taxis, and even less for the Jardin Marjorelle. The biggest one, Velt Koekleberg, doesn't provide any food for now since it is at its very beginning.

However also in this case meeting the neighbors and learning are mentioned as the main reason for joining the garden and as positive aspects of the experience, even though the gardeners will have individual parcels and good reasons to think that they will manage to produce enough food for their needs.

The theory that people are more present than vegetables because food production is not enough is therefore to be disclaimed. It can rather be affirmed that people and food are equally important both in terms of motivation for joining and in terms of outcome of the gardening experience.

According to the data collected the perspective of better knowing the neighbors, of establishing cultural exchanges (beside technical agriculture competences to be shared, some said they wanted to practice Arabic while others plan to improve their French) as well as the opportunity for an inter-generational exchange and finally for creating a different social dynamic are not only very present but also consistent with external factors such as the location of the gardens in very urbanized and often socially sensitive part of the city.

The importance given to the opportunity of meeting people is consistent with other statements related to social interaction: educational aspects, citizens participation and social projects. Talking about people the connection with the idea of sharing and of reciprocity is undeniable.

9. Sharing and Commons

The commons are almost never mentioned autonomously and during the brainstorming, when asked about such a topic, people replied rather with examples, often of goods that would be rather defined as public (such as transports, health systems, parks), or referring directly to garden. The

answers mentioning abstract concepts or personal attitudes were, though, remarkably consistent with the theoretical debate on the common.

Indeed some key words were mentioned and these statements were definitely not influenced by the debate about the commons, for the important reason that such a debate is almost completely unknown to the participants to the survey. The result is that certain concepts, both related to the idea of commons and of sharing, are meaningful in the survey on the basis of the gardening experience as it is.

It is possible to group the ideas in some main categories: nature and food, exchange and community, organisation and management and positive attitudes towards society and other people.

Indeed community and sharing are as present in the interviews as knowledge and exchange; furthermore the gardeners mentioned feelings related to joy and happiness both referring to commons and to sharing.

With few exceptions pointing out specific examples (most of whom were actually more related to the idea of public) or mentioning the idea of co-ownership the discourse remained at a very theoretical level not involving practical nor legal arrangement and policies.

However about one third of the participants to the survey mentioned practical issues: highlighting for example how problematic would be managing something in common. Some suggested that trust, responsibility and good organisation skills are essential for governing the commons.

Apparently urban gardens present consistent affinity with all the set of key words we have mentioned about the commons but an articulate consideration about the topic is almost completely absent.

We have here practical examples of urban commons outside and without the debate: it creates a favorable situation where the debate about the commons helps in the understanding the dynamics of urban gardening and such dynamics can contribute to the debate itself.

Something similar happens for the idea of degrowth.

10. Crisis, Growth and..... Degrowth

In order to verify how far urban gardening is considered by people involved as a tied to the idea of degrowth the brainstorming focused on two concepts: crisis and growth.

As for the first four main lines can be identified while for the second the scenario is more complex.

Concerning the idea of crisis the combination of answers is significant: among the four main lines only three are totally negative. And even among these three relevant differences exist: on the one hand emotions like “rage”, “hopelessness” and “sadness” are mentioned; on the other hand more practical issues both from an economical and a political point of view are reported. In fact if the crisis is doubtlessly connected with economic issues (“poverty”, “banks”, “prices increase” are among the most used expressions), but it is as well considered as social. For instance some of the participants to the survey connected “crisis” with “racism”, “injustice”, “misery” and “exploitation”.

Notwithstanding the concern about the consequences of the crisis, with a special attention for future generations (both “youth” and “grandchildren” are mentioned during the brainstorming), positive ideas are also expressed. Indeed the fourth remarkable line that emerged in this part of the study is that crisis can be also defined as an opportunity. And under this category the ideas of “social change”, “mutual help”, “sharing” and “acting together” are prevalent.

A correspondence exists between answers mentioning the opportunities of change offered by the crisis and utterances explicitly referring to “degrowth”.

Indeed the latter is less present than one could imagine: the urban gardeners, not oddly indeed, rather connect the idea of “growth” with plants, vegetables and animals (or even human evolution).

About a fifth of them, though, mentions immediately the theory of “degrowth”. Such a reply inform us about a certain level of political awareness and engagement, but in practice the idea of crisis as an opportunity, although strongly connected to such a framework is more present than the concept of “degrowth”.

The reference to human or plants development when dealing with “growth” during the brainstorming is consistent with a general set of responses where the idea of growth is associated with completely diversified concepts, but it is also logically related to a context where nature is extremely important.

Some of the gardeners affirm they cannot associate such a word with anything, some just mention economy. In other answers the idea is associated with images as a shrunk dress, a croissant (being “growth” “croissance” in French), babies teeth or even faith (probably because of the linguistic association with the verb “croire”, to which, however the word “croissance” is not related).

These fancy images are equally distributed among the ones who made reference to plants and animals, the ones who mentioned economic concepts and eventually the ones who spoke about degrowth.

However these latter are the only ones who also mentioned ideas as “waste reduction”, “decline” and “society in danger”.

If for the “sharing” and “commons” a positive attitudes are mixed with ideas as responsibility, knowledge and respect (also related to organisation), dealing with “crisis” and “growth” we find negative feelings or aspects of society and random utterances where the idea of vegetables growth is more present than economic one.

In both the cases, however, people are, again more present than plants.

11. Conclusions

If we collect the most used words during the survey some interesting concepts emerge: sharing, exchange, participation and social inclusion, reciprocity and responsibility , and eventually leisure.

Indeed the most relevant thing is that gardeners found a way to govern a resource in common notwithstanding the difficulties that can exist both in the interaction with public authorities and in the internal relations among the groups (which are the most mentioned as negative aspects of the experience). Urban community gardens are concrete alternatives to an over-urbanized context which isolates individuals breaking or discouraging social interactions. Educational, economic and ecological aspects, although appearing as main arguments for gardening, are consequences of a more relevant need that is to gather together building new ties inside the community.

In order to make it work both practical and theoretical issues are involved: common approaches and practical skills are needed.

Compared with the cases of common-pool resources management studied by E. Ostrom they offer a further interesting characteristic: while most of Ostrom's cases were examples of ancient, customary rules of common governance of a resource (based on local traditions and established and proven methodologies) in urban gardens, if we consider them as a sort of commons, rules and mechanism of functioning are to be built together case by case.

That's the reason why the study of these experiences can offer a significant contribute to the debate about the commons and to the elaboration of possible models of governing the commons.

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