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Dhánaíl na hÉireann NÁ Buidé

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COST Action Urban Agriculture Europe: UA in the Greater Dublin Region Short Term Scientific Mission Report

Maynooth, Ireland 26/08-10/09/2013



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Index

1. Purpose of the STSM.....	6
2. Methodology.....	8
3. Results	10
4. Discussion.....	14
5. Conclusions	18
6. References.....	20

1. Purpose of the STSM

The purpose of the STSM in the Greater Dublin Region was to work on the horticultural dimension of urban agriculture in the reference region as a preview to preparing the Working Group Meeting which was held from 11-13 September, 2013 at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, (Dublin).

Horticulture is a very significant element of agricultural production in the Greater Dublin region. The hosts suggested to devise an up to date profile of horticultural activity in the peri-urban area, mapping the productive lands around the city, detailing the nature of production and its sale into national and local markets, estimating the value of the industry to the local economy, identifying niche industries within horticultural practice such as organic farming and farmers markets that source produce locally, etc. and get to know the view and opinions of different stakeholders (producers, politicians, consumers) of the current and future development. This evaluation of the horticultural sector in the Greater Dublin Region would help to compliment the hosts' knowledge on non-professional urban agriculture in the Greater Dublin Region, and would allow comparing the relation of professional and non-professional UA in this reference region to other urban European regions.

Besides the objective of generally describing the horticultural production in the Greater Dublin Region, I wanted to focus on a) efforts to promote sustainability by different stakeholders and b) interactions and connections between producers and consumers resp. citizens. After my arrival and first discussions with Mary Corcoran and Patricia Kettle, I decided on following research questions, all referred to the Greater Dublin Region:

- What are the efforts to promote sustainability of agricultural / horticultural production of different stakeholders (farmers, policy-makers, civil society)?
- What are the efforts to promote local food supply chains (farmers, policy-makers, civil society)?
- Which benefits do peri-urban farmers provide to the citizens / to the environment?
- How do the peri-urban farmers connect with the citizens?
-
- How do citizens engage to get access to land and to food besides the supermarkets?

2. Methodology

I started with a web research to find out about important stakeholders resp. interview partners in the context of UA in the Greater Dublin Region. Then I searched for current data on the horticultural sector in this region, to compare it with the previous Horticultural Census 2001.

After research questions and interview partners were fixed, interview guidelines were developed (examples see Annex). Some questions for the interview guideline for the Dublin Food Coop were taken from the questionnaire of WG 3 and were partly adapted. Whenever possible, the interviews were recorded and provisionally transcribed later on. In some cases, formal interviews were replaced by conversations and observations during visits, and notes were made during and/or after the visits. In Table 1, the time schedule of my visits and interviews are shown.

Date	Interview / <i>visit without interview</i>
28.8.	Dublin Food Coop
30.8.	<i>Denis Healy's Farm</i>
3.9.	Bord Bia – The Irish Food Board
4.9.	Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marines
5.9.	<i>Pearse College Allotments</i>
6.9.	Teagasc (advisory service) + <i>Car trip across Fingal + spontaneous talk with a farmer + meeting with an UA activist</i>
10.9.	<i>Organic demonstration farm walk at Paddy Byrne's farm</i>

Table 1: Time schedule of interviews and field trips

I first described the different activities and opinions about current and future development of UA of different stakeholders. Then I categorized UA activities according to actors and location (Ejderyan and Salomon Cavin 2012). After that, I figured out forms of relationships between producers and citizens and categorized them according to who initiated the activity, including an estimation of the status quo and the future development of the activity. Additionally I tried to find answers to the question: “Organic and urban - how is it linked?”

3. Results

Horticulture in Ireland in the context of national policies

Ireland is about 60% self-sufficient of vegetables and fruit. Only taking into account produce which can be grown domestically, Ireland is 23.5% self-sufficient in fruit and 84.8% in vegetables including potatoes (DAFF 2009).

In particular in horticulture, infrastructure is costly, and mechanisation tends to replace people. There is a strong competition with foreign produce, also because foreign multiples (Tesco, Aldi, Lidl etc.) have their own supply chains with produce from other countries. Irish farmers are selling in the Irish supermarkets, but the supermarkets press the prices down what is aggravated by the fact that no farmers cooperatives exist. Therefore growers are tending to specialise and the smaller and less efficient ones stop the farming business. The national policy, mainly represented by the Food Harvest 2020 Horticultural Action Group, supports specialisation and aims for increased competitiveness and exports (Bord Bia 2012). Bord Bia, which is a state body funded by the ministry and responsible for promoting and marketing Irish food, developed a brand for Irish produce (“Origin Ireland”). Both, Bord Bia and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marines, want to raise people’s awareness to increase vegetable and fruit consumption, e.g. with the school project “Incredible edibles” and by supporting “Grow it yourself”, a global community of food growers. Despite the goal to raise horticultural production in Ireland, funding for research activities declined, also due to the recession.

General profile of horticultural activities in the Greater Dublin Region

The Greater Dublin Region has 1.53 million inhabitants and comprises four councils (Fig 1). Dublin accounted for approx. 40% vegetable production in 2000 (Bord Glas 2001). The very most of the production in the Greater Dublin Region takes place in county Fingal where primarily potatoes, field and protected vegetables are produced. Fruit production is a very small niche, with soft fruits nearly totally restricted to protected production (Fig. 2+3). In the last decade, the average farm size increased from 15 ha in 1999 to 34 ha in 2010. The number of growers was reduced by half whereas the area slightly increased (Fig. 4). Until 2008, there was pressure to rezone agricultural land. From 1990 to 2010, cultivated land has fallen from approx. 34000 ha to 27000 ha (McKeon 2010). This means that the proportion of field vegetables has increased in contrary to other field crops. At the moment there is no building pressure because the city is not growing now, it is overbuilt due to the property bubble. Moreover, a lot of young people leave the country because of the recession.



Figure 1: The Greater Dublin Region

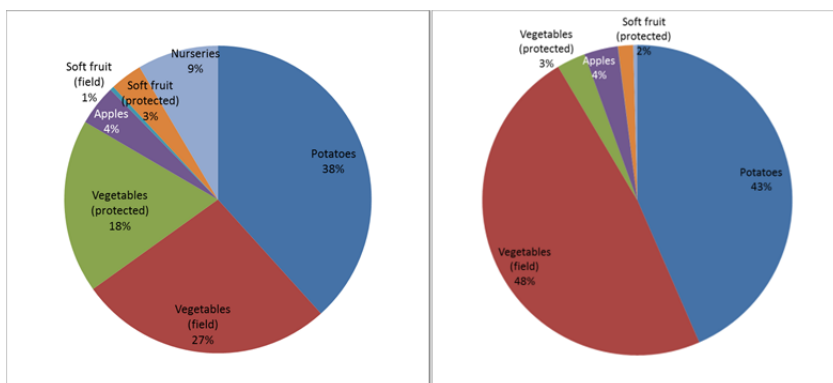


Figure 2 and Figure 3: Number of horticultural producers and growers in the Greater Dublin Region (Bord Bia & DAFF 2009a+b)



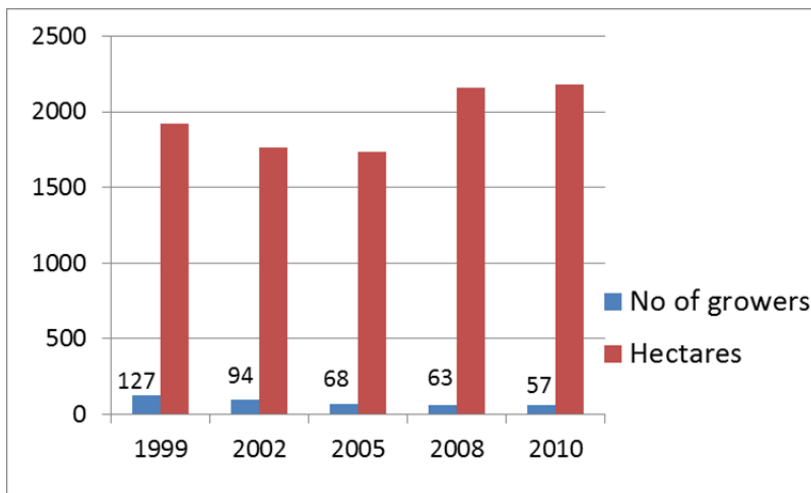


Figure 4: Development of farms and area of field vegetables from 1999 to 2010 (Bord Bia & DAFF 2009b, Government of Ireland 2012)

Market orientation of horticultural producers in Ireland and in the Greater Dublin Region

Nearly all production is for the domestic market, except some large companies as Keelings which also produce for the export market. 85% of the total food retail market - also valid for the market of horticultural fresh produce – goes through Central Distribution Centers to multiples and supermarkets. The other 15% of the fresh horticultural products are sold through grocery stores or directly on farmers markets and farm shops. This percentage did not change much in the last seven years. There are more than 100 farmers markets in the whole country and there were growing quite well until the recession came, when a lot of people did return to supermarkets.

Reasons for the concentration of horticulture in the Greater Dublin Region seem to be rather the suitability of the soil and the good climate (no frost risk) than the proximity to the city itself and the connected enhanced marketing possibilities. The high value of the land causes that even small areas are farmed.

The long farming tradition in this region was emphasized a lot what was also expressed in the websites of some farms and food companies where advertising is readily done with reference to tradition and sustainability.



Bramley Apples – a traditional cooking apple grown in Ireland



Tomatoes grown in Ireland and labeled with „Origin Irish“

The role of the organic production system

1.2% of all agricultural area is organically managed. Of organic vegetables and fruits, only 30% are Irish grown, 70% are imported. An Organic Farming Action Plan 2013-2015 was launched recently (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marines 2013). There is the aim to increase the total organic production to 5%, with a view to substitute organic imports for Irish-produced organic produce wherever possible and to develop sustainable export markets for Irish organic produce as supplies become available.

In the chapter about organic horticulture, following key actions are planned: identify current demand and supply potentials, conduct practical trials on nutrition and investigate suitable varieties, examine the potential of financial support (Back to work scheme, Internship scheme, Farm Apprenticeship Scheme and bring in ‘Small Farm Scheme’ under new CAP), and improve the advisory service.

Nevertheless, the aim to reach 5% organic production has been there for years and there is only a very slow growth of the organic sector and its significance for policy-makers seems very low. This was expressed in my interviews where political stakeholders never mentioned ‘organic’ unless I asked them about their view on organic production.

One of my interview partners from Bord Bia explains the low interest for organic food as following: “It is a difficult concept for Irish people. Organic is, from a consumers perspective, if you worry about food, you will tend to organic. If you live in the heart of London, and you have no connection to agriculture, and no knowledge, but you have money and you don’t know how to connect to nature and you are worried about your food and the quality of it, organic might come to them. But in Ireland, we tend to trust our food. And people are driving through the countryside and they see cattle and sheep on the hills. And they say: ‘Where’s the issue?’ And the price is a big barrier.”

Efforts for more sustainability in horticultural production and supply chains

Besides organic farmers who adjust their whole production system to sustainable farming principles, top-down and bottom-up approaches for more sustainability were identified. They are not exclusively targeted to urban regions, but of course influence the debate on UA when we state that UA should bring innovations in sustainable agriculture.

Organic farmers

In the whole country, there are approx. 400 organic horticultural growers, whereof 21 own more than 6 ha. In 2008, only two organic field vegetable growers were situated in the Greater Dublin Region. There is generally a higher concentration of organic farmers in the countryside than in urban regions. This can be explained by the fact that most organic farms were started by immigrants from other European countries who came to Ireland in the last decades and sought to settle in a quiet place.

Organic farmers are said to be more interested in selling directly than conventional farmers as they rely on higher prices for their products and are generally more diversified because of the necessity of crop rotations, which I could confirm on the two organic farms I visited.

- Denis Healy's farm: situated in Co. Wicklow, 1h drive from Dublin City Center: selling at the Dublin Food Coop and at a farmers market in Dublin next to other farmers markets in Co. Wicklow
- Paddy Byrne's farm: situated in Skerries, Fingal: farm gate sales, partly with a CSA approach, and delivering a restaurant in Dublin

Top-down initiatives for sustainability

- **“Origin Green” campaign:** In June 2012 Bord Bia introduced a new sustainability program for Ireland's food and drink industry. On the participating farms and companies, the usage of resources, the carbon emissions and social performance are assessed. It should make the entrepreneurs aware of their status quo and then help them to increase sustainability step by step. They have to choose at least 4 from 7 target areas (Fig. 5). I experienced much enthusiasm from Bord Bia, from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marines and from entrepreneurs about this campaign.
- **“Blooms day”:** This is a food and garden fair where over 100 companies and farmers sell directly to the consumers (cheese, bread, jam, beer, ...) and so promote their products. The event facilitates direct contact between consumers and producers.
- **School gardening project “Incredible Edibles”:** The program is targeted to 8-10 year old pupils and is running for 5 years now. Interested schools apply to “Agri Aware” (a charitable trust that is funded by the farming and agri-food industry) which is responsible and provides materials. There are no costs for the schools.
- **GIY is supported financially by Bord Bia**

Bottom-up initiatives for sustainability

- **GIY and the Dublin Community Growers:** networks of community and allotment gardeners
- **Urban Farm project:** The farm is located on a roof top of a former chocolate fabric in the city center. The aims are researching and demonstrating intensive urban growing techniques, growing food, keeping fowl, fish and bees.
- **Pearse College & Allotment Gardens:** Pearse College is a further education school which has municipal land under free use. The school offers several courses dealing with ecology and horticulture, among them a course about organic gardening. They established an allotment garden on their ground where students and residents can join.
- **Dublin Food Coop:** Established in 1983 and being the only food coop in Ireland, the Dublin Food Coop is an outlet for wholefoods and organics and tries to making available Irish products. Members get discounts and in exchange should get involved in work and decision-making. For vegetable and fruit supply, five farmers come on two days a week to sell their produce in addition to imported produce. Despite the goal of making



Biodiversity on organic farms



Figure 5: Target areas of the „Origin Green“ campaign (www.bordbia.ie)



Urban Farm project (above)
Dublin Food Coop (below)

available Irish food, there is only a low proportion of Irish products offered and even less local products which is planned to change in the future. My interview partner, who had a paid job in the food coop, described the advantage for the farmers as a “farer deal than they would get in the supermarkets”. About the relationship to the city council he stated: “We need to get better relations with the city council, we have to start about their plans of regenerating Dublin and our plans of what we need in terms of growth and see if there is common ground. We want to try new ideas like community kitchens and enable local producers to set up and produce own food to sell to our members. Up to now there was not much need to talk with each other.”

- **Lifeline project:** The project is a community led campaign to revalue the disused Midland Great Western Railway cutting by addressing themes as sustainable food systems, urban biodiversity, green transport, health, recreation and waste management. As first product, the LifeLine Soap is produced which contains over 50% waste ingredients sourced locally. To develop the campaign further, alignments with the city councils were stated to be more important than financial support.
- **SPUDS:** SPUDS is a community based action research project where a naturally blight-resistant potato variety was distributed to citizens to show the uselessness of GM in this regard. Citizens were asked to grow the variety in their plots or gardens and document their experiences which are then analyzed and published.



LifeLine Soap
<http://desireland.ie>



Promotion of a naturally blight-resistant potato variety in Dublin city center, combined with an action to paint potatoes with a non-perfect shape
<http://desireland.ie>

4. Discussion

UA in the Greater Dublin Region characterized by the type of actors, the location and the value to the local economy

I took the methodology of Ejderyan and Salomon Cavin (2012) to characterize the studied UA activities in terms of actors and location. On the one hand there are large scale producers using the good soil and good climate to produce for an anonym national or international market, under the process of consolidation. On the other hand there is a growing number of citizens growing their own in community and allotment gardens.

In the urban areas of the city, no professional farming activities are carried out. Large (> 40 ha) and medium scale producers (20-40 ha) are mostly situated in Fingal which is part of the Greater Dublin Region, but has a very rural characteristic, with a low population density. I could not gain detailed information about the number of conventional horticultural producers in the Greater Dublin Region who sell directly, but I was told repeatedly that there are not many. During my car trip across Fingal with Patricia Kettle, we could see a farmer's stall next to the road.

The two organic farms I visited are relatively small compared to the Irish average farm size in the horticultural sector. They both sell directly, one selling at several markets and the other one concentrating on farm gate sales, just having started with CSA. They are both located very peripheral, only accessible by car, one of them in Co. Wicklow, only urban in the respect that the business is partly targeted to the urban market. The other farmer is situated in Fingal, next to the small town Skerries, recruiting most of its customers from Skerries. The connection of these farms to urbanites is only given through the products on the markets resp. in the restaurant.



Farmer selling directly next to a road in Fingal

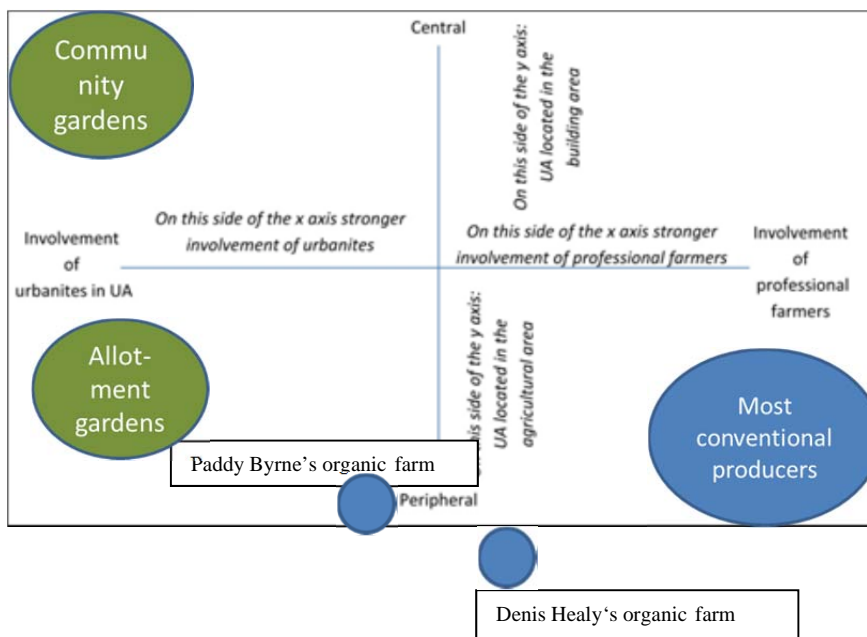


Figure 6: Types of UA in the Greater Dublin Region characterized by the type of actors and the location

Enfenced community garden in Dublin City (above) and enfenced field owned by Keelings (below)



What stroke me was on the one hand the sudden transient from the urban to the rural (Fingal is part of the Greater Dublin Region but with a very rural characteristic), and on the other hand, the invisibility of agriculture because of fences and stonewalls, so that farms and food companies were very enclosed.

Apart from the significance of local vegetable supply to the citizens - most of the horticultural produce in the Greater Dublin Region is targeted to the Irish market and an appropriate part is delivered to the supermarkets and multiples in Dublin - not much additional value of the peri-urban horticulture to the local economy was visible. Most workers are from Eastern Europe, and the upstream production (seeds, fertilizers and pesticides mainly from UK and the Netherlands) and the downstream production sector (processing in Eastern Europe) is operated in other countries.



Efforts for more sustainability in horticultural production and marketing chains

During my research about the organic sector in Ireland and UA in the Greater Dublin I worked on answers to the question “Organic and urban – how is it linked?”

Links between organic and urban

- *regarding non-professional and educational of UA activities:*
 - Most urban gardening activities are organic farming with or without being aware of it
 - Many people who drive the urban gardening movement are convinced of organic farming and do their projects with reference to organic standards
 - Organic farming is a well-known sustainable farming system which is seen as a future model and is tried to promote within UA activities to increase sustainability and awareness in the next generation
- *regarding entrepreneurial UA activities:*
 - Organic farmers have many market opportunities in the city, for food as well as for other activities

Interestingly, when talking about sustainability with interviewees from Bord Bia and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, organic production was not spontaneously mentioned and regarded as not necessary to promote. They were very proud of the “Origin Green” campaign and were convinced that companies are interested in saving resources because they want to save money. They estimated the impact of direct selling, local and organic food initiatives very low and did not see a shift in the future towards more local food systems, just as they were not interested in such a development.

When I talked with initiators of bottom-up initiatives with the aim to increase sustainability of the food system, I could find a very different approach, as they regarded people not only as consumers. Moreover, they were aware of the mission of UA to promote a more sustainable food system and to provide more benefits than only food. In contrast to political stakeholders, they saw a necessity of UA for Dublin.

Interrelationships between producers and citizens in the Greater Dublin Region

During my research I came across different forms of connections between producers and citizens. Some are initiated and offered from the producers (farmers markets, pick yourself), others are initiated by consumers (food coops).

In the case of food activism, often both producers and consumers are involved. Consumers escape their restricted role as consumers and become active in changing the current food system.

In the case of allotment gardeners, they are producers and consumers at the same time.

Activity	Initiator	Prevalence (Status quo)	Prevalence (future)
Farmers markets	Producer	+	+
Pick yourself	Producer	-	--
Communication in the web (Feedback to products etc.)	Producer	0	?
Actively sourcing local food (Food coops)	Consumer	-	+
Engaging in enterprises manufacturing food sourced locally (The Spades)	‘down-stream’ producer	0	?
Engaging in food activism	Consumer /Producer	0	?
GIY	Prosumer	++	+++

-- not prevalent at all, - not prevalent, + some importance, ++ prevalent, +++ very prevalent, 0 no information about prevalence

Table 2: Activities related to local food in the Greater Dublin Region and the estimation of importance currently and in the future according to interviewees

Perception of UA of different stakeholders

To representatives of Bord Bia, UA was community and allotment gardens, they did not see any connection between peri-urban farmers and the city. About GIY they think that people get a few meals out of it, but that there is no impact on the retail market. "It safes them [the allotment gardeners] a few euro, it's a social activity, exercise. We do not have a measure how much of the market has been supplied by GIY. It would be 1% of 1%. We support projects, GIY, because we feel that people are interested in food and growing their own. They buy even more fruit and veg when they are in the supermarket, that increases the market, increases a healthy diet. It's a neutral benefit for the commercial side as well as for the individual person." Asking them if they have heard of the urban farm project they replied: "There are a lot of these stories. There is not much of an amount of roof gardens here, it is more a phenomenon in other European countries."

Representatives of Bord Bia did not regard the farmers in peri-urban Fingal as urban farmers. For them peri-urban agriculture is just there to produce food. In fact, the peri-urban agriculture in the Greater Dublin Region did not seem to have much junctures with the city. This is due to the fact that the whole agricultural sector is very market-dominated and market-driven and that there are not many small farmers left who would do direct selling and so connect to the citizens. In addition, people tend to buy cheaper food in supermarkets rather than visit farmers markets because of the recession.

Several persons told me that Irish people have a close connection to the countryside. They have or had parents or grandparents as farmers, for them agriculture is something normal and food is generally trusted. But in recent years, there are increasing concerns about the quality of the food system and this concern expresses itself in the rise of GIY which is however not reduced to urban environments. In Dublin itself, a great number of community gardens have arisen in the last years, amongst others supported by the Dublin Community Growers. Mostly temporarily vacant sites are used for community gardens which are seen as means for community development and environmental improvement.

Ways of cooperation between peri-urban producers and citizens to ensure a local supply chain with numerous benefits seem to be not much discussed, neither by political stakeholders, consumers nor producers.

5. Conclusions

I did not succeed to answer all my research questions I stated at the beginning of my stay. The main challenge was that when I wanted to study the peri-urban horticulture in the Greater Dublin Region, I had to deal with the historical and the current situation of the whole food system in Ireland. But for doing a sound analysis of the Irish food system and its impact on peri-urban horticulture in the Greater Dublin Region, my stay was much too short. Unfortunately, I did not manage to interview several farmers. I only visited two organic farmers which sure is not enough to get information about the views of the farmers which may be the most important stakeholder group to answer my research questions.

Nevertheless, I want to present my key findings:

- about peri-urban professional agriculture:

- Irish horticultural production is generally highly dependent on fossil fuels, seeds, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides from other countries
- Farmers tend to specialise and are merely orientated towards supermarkets
- Sales on farmers markets and other forms of direct selling have been decreasing over time and do now in recession time
- Peri-urban farms are in sparsely-inhabited, non-leisure areas with restricted access
- There is little connection between peri-urban farmers and citizens

- about (peri-)urban non-professional agriculture:

- Interest of consumers in food increases → GIY is a growing movement
- Only non-professional agriculture is regarded as UA by national policy-makers who estimate the impact on the food system as not relevant at all
- For national policy-makers, UA is not connected with increasing sustainability of the food system; it is valued particularly for bringing social benefits
- Top-down approaches in UA by city councils are more a reaction on citizens' demands than an active engagement

- about sustainability

- Initiatives for more sustainability in agriculture come both from bottom-up and top-down
- Top-down initiatives stay within the current conventional food system and do not aim to increase the amount of organically and socially sound produced food
- Initiatives from bottom-up are mostly based on organic principles, want to raise people's awareness regarding food production and rather create connections between different stakeholders

As consequences,

- **bottom-up initiatives should be involved in city planning to ensure more social and environmental benefits**
- **we should talk more about how professional and non-professional UA agriculture can be connected to have more benefits on both sides**
- **COST Action WG 3 – Entrepreneurial models should also take into account the view of the consumers/citizens and their innovative potential to develop new forms of UA**

I want to add that I very much appreciate the introduction of WG 5 which hopefully can provide some answers to the question "How can UA be a pioneer for sustainable agriculture?"

The collaboration with the host institution was successful and will go on by a common publication about UA in the Greater Dublin Region which will comprise contents of WG 2 and WG 3.

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ANNEX

Interview guideline Food Coop Dublin

1. General data

- Year of foundation
- Employed persons (paid, full time equivalent)
- Involved persons (volunteers, approx.)
- Volume of sales

2. Description of activity

- What are the objectives of the co-op?
- How does the co-op work? Decision-making process? Participation? Work division?
- Who are the members?
- Where do the products come from to what percentage? (From Dublin city, from Dublin county, from surrounding counties, from Ireland, from other countries)

3. Horticultural products

- Which horticultural products do you purchase?
- Where do they come from? (From Dublin city, from Dublin county, from surrounding counties, from Ireland, from other countries)
- What are the main criteria for choosing the farmers?
- Do you have special contracts or cooperation forms (pre-financing, purchasing lower quality to a lower price, helping out at the field)?

4. Benefits

- How would you describe the benefits
 - for the farmers
 - for the members
 - for the society as a whole
 - for the environment

5. Institutional environment

- How does the public support your activity?
- How does the public limit your activity?
- How does the Common Agricultural Policy affect your operation?
- Which partnerships are you involved in? (e.g. professional organizations, marketing alliances, ...)

6. Which factors (reasons) make your activities successful?

7. Which are the principal problems that your activities are facing?

The questions are partly excerpted from a questionnaire developed by Working group 3 "Professionals and entrepreneurial models of Urban agriculture" of COST-Action Urban Agriculture Europe (UAE).

Interview guideline for Bord Bia

- What are the objectives of Bord Bia?
- I read about the sustainability conference in the end of September in Dublin. Can you tell me about the Origin Green campaign?
- For protected cultivation, a lot of energy is needed. How can you achieve sustainability there?
- Do you promote a wider diversity of crops in Ireland, by protected cultivation or just by trying out new crops that could be suitable for your climate? For example garlic?
- What role does food security and local food supply play for Bord Bia?
- To what extent do farmers use direct marketing?
- Do you think that the retail pattern will change?
- What do you think about agricultural and horticultural activities in the city? Do you promote them, how do you promote them?
- Is there is a pressure to convert fields into building zones in Fingal?
- What are the objectives of Bord Bia regarding organic food?

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General research interest:

- Organic strawberry and vegetable growing and breeding
- Sustainable and extensive production systems

COST UAE research interest:

- Innovative concepts of sustainable urban agriculture, especially new forms of consumer-producer cooperations
- Underlying values and interests of different UA stakeholders

COST-Action UAE: WG3 – Entrepreneurial models



COST- the acronym for European **CO**operation in the field of **Scientific** and **Technical** Research- is the oldest and widest European intergovernmental network for cooperation in research. Established by the Ministerial Conference in November 1971, COST is presently used by the scientific communities of 35 European countries to cooperate in common research projects supported by national funds.

The funds provided by COST - less than 1% of the total value of the projects - support the COST cooperation networks (COST Actions) through which, with EUR 30 million per year, more than 30.000 European scientists are involved in research having a total value which exceeds EUR 2 billion per year. This is the financial worth of the European added value which COST achieves.

A “bottom up approach” (the initiative of launching a COST Action comes from the European scientists themselves), “à la carte participation” (only countries interested in the Action participate), “equality of access” (participation is open also to the scientific communities of countries not belonging to the European Union) and “flexible structure” (easy implementation and light management of the research initiatives) are the main characteristics of COST.

As precursor of advanced multidisciplinary research COST has a very important role for the realisation of the European Research Area (ERA) anticipating and complementing the activities of the Framework Programmes, constituting a “bridge” towards the scientific communities of emerging countries, increasing the mobility of researchers across Europe and fostering the establishment of “Networks of Excellence” in many key scientific domains such as: Biomedicine and Molecular Biosciences; Food and Agriculture; Forests, their Products and Services; Materials, Physical and Nanosciences; Chemistry and Molecular Sciences and Technologies; Earth System Science and Environmental Management; Information and Communication Technologies; Transport and Urban Development; Individuals, Societies, Cultures and Health. It covers basic and more applied research and also addresses issues of pre-normative nature or of societal importance.