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AESOP4Food Sustainable Food Planning Seminar

Bucharest Living Lab – Buruiană Community Garden

a. Intro on the Living Lab, research aim and research questions

The subject of the Bucharest Living Lab is the Buruiană Community Garden in Domnești, located in the periurban area, in the South-West of the city and 4 kilometres away from the ring road of Bucharest.

The research answers the following research question:

How to address the Eastern European and post-socialist context in an appropriate manner in order to support the development of UA in the form of community gardens?

The aim of the research is to reflect on the potential of community gardens to contribute to transforming the food system in a sustainable way.

The Buruiană Community Garden is a bottom-up initiative of a group of young people who want to lead a sustainable lifestyle. It is a space for growing food, education and socialisation, following principles of regenerative agriculture and sustainable practices. Members have access to the community garden and allotment gardens inside the 9000 sqm plot, located next to a river and accessible by car.

This community garden is a new initiative and it represents an opportunity for exploring the situation and transformational potential of community actions, mostly disregarded by the population of post-socialist countries where the word “cooperative” has a negative connotation. The garden is located in the peripheral area of a large city, strongly affected by suburban sprawl. At the same time, among other bottom-up initiatives in Bucharest and other cities in Romania, it demonstrates the growing interest of city inhabitants in a more sustainable lifestyle.

b. Challenges

The challenges faced by the Buruiană Community Garden are 1. the difficulty of involving new participants, 2. achieving financial sustainability, and 3. the large amount of time required to manage such a project compared to the time availability of the organisers.

c. Result of the analysis and mapping

The analyses conducted for this research aim to gain results that can be used for the future development of the Living Lab at a local scale, but also for the sustainable development of the peripheral area of Bucharest.

The stakeholder map identifies the community garden as a link between city inhabitants and the rural region. For a sustainable development of the initiative it is necessary to include local stakeholders, the administration, public institutions, schools, preschools and other social or educational institutions, as well as neighbours and interested locals and food growers, besides inner city inhabitants. The main stakeholders for the activities of the Community Garden that are more suitable and achievable in the first stage of growing the community garden are schools and universities.

The food system map analysis includes the Domnești Territorial Administrative Unit centred around the community garden. The main elements identified on the map are large chain supermarkets, the local temporary market functioning on Saturdays, some local food and grocery stores, restaurants and fast-food stores on the main roads. Arable land is also identified at the edge of the built environment, in the OpenStreetMap used as a support for the analysis and on CORINE land use map and satellite views. It was not possible to determine the amount of individual food growing taking place in private gardens based on open source information. Quantifying these practices requires more time than is available for this research and the information on private agricultural practices, although fairly important, has been left out of the food system map.

Relating to the subject of our Living Lab, there is also a Seed Bank NGO and garden, in the distance of 3,4 km from the community garden. Other elements of interest are schools, preschools, elderly care homes and an orphanage, all potential stakeholders of the community garden. Open air events venues are also shown in the map to demonstrate the interest for open space events that can be used for financial revenue.

The power map concludes that laws, regulations and public policies determine the power dynamics of the local development strategy and the local food system, and the entity with most power is the local administration. Private investors who deal with suburban development, supermarkets, new urban residents, large-scale farmers and mobility with the personal car or public transport have more power, especially because of financial possibilities, compared to people engaged in agriculture, traditional informal markets, the rural population, small scale farmers and mobility with the bicycle or train. These differences in power lead to a growing number of suburban housing developments and to land use transformation that is also visible in the analysis of data available on CORINE Land Cover maps. The maps from 2012 and 2018, show a visible increase of construction sites compared to 2006 and 1990-2000, occupying land formerly mapped as complex cultivation patterns. The tool is used for large-scale analysis of the territory and demonstrates the extent of urban sprawl into the nearby peripheral areas of Bucharest.

Concerning the situation of land available for food growing and small urban green spaces in Romania, the conclusion of the scientific literature review is that the current situation represents an opportunity for the community garden to have a significant role in the food system as a citizen-led transformation (Scoones et. al, 2015). The analysis of the context

points to some problems concerning the attitude of authorities in relation to agriculture and food issues, the prevention of loss of agricultural land is not prioritised and small farmers receive little support from the state (Grădinaru, Iojă, 2022). At the same time, the civil society is not engaged in decision making because of a mentality inherited from communist times and young families with children prefer living in single family homes, mostly with very small green spaces due to high land prices (Onose, 2022). The study „Integrating food provision in urban policies in the context of land use transformation and displacement” (Grădinaru, Iojă, 2022) points out the large number of small and subsistence farms in Romania, which represent an opportunity for our Living Lab to learn from local traditional practices and to encourage people to continue these practices. The community garden can also raise awareness on the importance of agricultural activities and on the struggles of local farmers, on the importance and ecological value of green spaces, and educate people in civic engagement by involving students and city inhabitants in the process of participatory planning through educational programmes and workshops. The study on small green infrastructure (Onose, 2022) states that there is an interest for city inhabitants to be involved in urban planning, management and design of urban green spaces, and we conclude that this is also an opportunity for growing the community garden and involving new participants.

d. Research approach and method

The research approach is to look at the Living Lab subject, the Buruiană community garden, identify the challenges of the project, analyse the local context and the general situation and propose a strategy that helps the development of the community garden. The methods used are repeated interactions with the community garden, participating in events, conducting interviews and site visits.

For the analysis and mapping of the food system we used different methods like investigating open source information provided by OpenStreetMap, CORINE land use map, satellite images, Google Maps information and site visits.

Time constraints and a small number of local students in the team have led to some limitations in the study. For more accurate results, the research should have included more interaction and interviews with stakeholders like local authorities, local schools, NGOs and participants. This study is mostly based on the information and experience of the Buruiană community garden organisers, as well as discrete observation of other community gardens in Bucharest with similar values.

Desk research was conducted to acquire more data on the situation of community gardens and urban agriculture in Romania, by investigating scientific literature of the Centre for Environmental Research and Impact Studies (CCMESI) of the University of Bucharest, doctoral theses and courses of the “Ion Mincu” University for Architecture and Urban Planning, and public information available on social media pages (for identifying informal online food markets).

e. Goal, vision, activities

The vision for the Living Lab is that peri-urban gardens become local initiatives and interaction accelerators and are solicited by the urban residents who are really invested in

process and participate regularly in the actions and events of these community gardens. These kinds of projects are flourishing on the outskirts of Bucharest, reinforcing local communities and ecosystems of actors and activities, improving life quality, and educating both city inhabitants of all ages and authorities.

The goals are:

1. The Community Garden will be a part of a network of institutions and organisations with similar values, working towards a sustainable lifestyle;
2. the community garden will also have a consistent agenda of events and educational activities.

In order to achieve these goals, we propose the following actions:

1. build collaborations with universities for research and practical applications like Living Labs. (e. g. University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, “Ion Mincu” University for Architecture and Urban Planning, Bucharest);
2. continue existing and create new collaborations with other related organisations for common events like cooking lessons, volunteering, camping or artistic events;
3. host educational programmes for schools, preschools and school-aged children, both local and from the city, for day, weekend or week activities that can be organised during the “Green Week” programme or at request from teachers or parents;
4. continue organising events, (e. g. farmers market, seed swap) and invite local residents to the festivity;
5. organise a festival around food and agriculture, inviting local authorities and institutions.

f. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Buruiană community garden has a potential to become a successful initiative by including local stakeholders in the process and it can transform the food system by educating people on the importance of agriculture and nature.

In March 2022, the European Commission published a communication on food security and reinforcing the resilience of food systems. The communication highlights that sustainability and resilience remain focus areas of food systems in the medium and long term. It also underlines the importance of the farm-to-fork strategy and R&I for mitigating pressures on food systems and reinforcing resilience (European Commission, 2022)

The Bucharest Living Lab is an answer of EC public policy and a concrete bottom up action for the construction of the food system resilience based on the multi-actor approach.

g. Self-reflection on process, the results, own values and position

Ioana:

The process of working on the Living Lab was very useful for my doctoral research. It helped me understand the context and challenges of community gardens in peri-urban areas by working in a Living Lab.

The activities of the seminar have also been helpful, bringing more experiences from around the world with different tutors guiding our progress.

For a future mapping assignment I would work on a larger team and plan more time for the activity, interacting more with the community project.

After this experience I can better understand the possibilities and limitations of bottom-up initiatives for a system transformation and conclude that such initiatives should also aim to put pressure on decision-makers and authorities.

Adina:

The activities of the seminar were very important and useful for my Phd, on local sustainable development and opened a new perspective in the linkages between rural and urban based on food systems. For a future mapping assignment I would work in a larger team and devote more time to the activity to interact more with the community project.

h. Main references

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