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Public policy and community gardening in Rome: progress and contradiction

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Abstract

Community gardening has been regarded as a practice through which citizens can challenge dominant power relations and claim back their rights to the city. It has also been considered a form of collaborative government used to reduce state responsibilities in social service provision in a context of neo-liberalization. In any given case, understanding whether public policies are enabling or disabling community gardening initiatives by providing specific regulations, public support or a favourable environment for community organizing, is crucial. This issue has recently garnered much attention worldwide and the aim of this paper is to contribute to this debate by focusing on the case of Rome, Italy. Like many other cities in the world, Rome is witnessing an important diffusion of community gardening initiatives. Thus far, the proliferation of community gardening has taken place in an almost completely spontaneous form and risen from the grassroots level in a lack of a legislative and regulatory framework, both at the national and local scale. In July 2015, the municipality of Rome enacted a regulation in this vacuum which is currently in its initial stages. This paper aims at understanding the aims and expected outcomes of this specific regulation, focusing, in particular, on the extent to which such a policy simply promotes the diffusion of community gardening initiatives, or aims at regulating and disciplining their practices.

Introduction

In the last fifteen years, an important debate regarding community gardening has arisen, including specific attention to the role of policies and their enabling or disabling effects on community gardening initiatives. In some cities, community gardens are regarded by local governments as something to be encouraged and supported in order to promote revitalization and redevelopment (London Assembly – Planning and Housing Committee 2010). Scholars have documented other cases where the policy environment is, by far, less encouraging (Ghose & Pettygrove 2014; Staeheli, Mitchell & Gibson 2002; Smith & Kurts 2003). A crucial issue is that of land use and competing urban functions (Pudup 2008). From a more critical perspective, community gardens and allotments have been interpreted as spaces of antagonism towards formal political institutions: grassroots activism is regarded as a means through which citizens can challenge dominant power relations and claim back their rights to the city (Baker 2004; Ghose & Pettygrove 2014; Mares & Peña 2010). At the same time, citizen activism has been interpreted as a form of collaborative governance which legitimizes and allows a reduction in state responsibilities in the provision of social services in a context of neo-liberalization (Ghose & Pettygrove 2014; Pudup 2008; Rosol 2012). Following McClintock (2014), we argue that the ambivalence of community gardening constitutes both a challenge and a legitimation to the current political regime which is inherent to the movement.

This paper seeks to contribute to this debate, by discussing a recent regulation on urban gardening enacted by the municipality of Rome in July 2015. The regulation includes gardens and allotments cultivated and managed by associations of citizens, hereinafter referred to as community gardens.

Methodology

The paper is based on:

- five in-depth interviews (see Table 1 in annex), conducted between February and April 2016;
- secondary sources, including the regulation on Community gardens and allotments (*Delibera* 38/2015), Guidelines for community gardens (2014), technical information on the municipality website

(www.comune.roma.it), newspaper articles and communication materials; and

- participation in the closing event of the EU-funded project *Sidigmed*, organized by the municipality of Rome from 8 to 10 April 2016, and including a one-day conference and two days of field visits in pilot community gardens

Community Gardening in Rome: Citizens' Initiatives and Political Responses

Rome is the biggest European municipality in terms of rural land, covering 40% of the municipal territory (Cutrufo 2010). Individual allotments in the city have been active since World War II, while community gardens have a more recent history, tracing back to the second half of the 2000s. The creation of community gardens is driven by very different interests and aims: citizens may be motivated by the idea of producing healthy food, generating social inclusion and participation or responding to the current economic crisis. A common underlying issue in many of the initiatives in Rome is the protection of public areas from urbanization and real estate speculation which are particularly problematic in the city.

The community gardens movement has grown rapidly: since its emergence, some associations have begun cooperating with each other in order to define common rules for the allocation and management of the areas and plots. Common guidelines for community gardens were produced and presented to the City Council in 2014; these guidelines are the basis of the first regulation for community gardens (*Regolamento per l'affidamento in comodato d'uso e per la gestione di aree a verde di proprietà di Roma capitale compatibili con la destinazione a orti/Giardini urbani*), approved by the municipality in July 2015 (Del 38/2015). In the meantime, gardeners associations are taking further steps to institutionalize their dialogue with the municipality, trying to obtain the establishment of a permanent consultative body on issues related to community gardens in order to increase their voice in policy making.

This regulation was not only the result of pressure from activists, but also paralleled by some attempts from the municipality of Rome to promote and regulate community gardens. The municipality first began dealing with urban gardens in the early 2000s. At that time, gardens and allotments were exclusively privately managed and well-diffused,

and there was a need for the administration to establish common rules, in particular in terms of food quality and working safety. In 2002, the municipality established a Municipal Unit for Urban Gardens and Allotments (*Servizio Orti Urbani*), located in the Department of the Environment, with the aim of mapping existing allotments and defining common rules for their management. The map was prepared in 2006 but never published, while the draft of the regulation began bouncing from one office to another without ever being formally approved.

In the meantime, things were changing both outside and inside the municipality. Externally, as already mentioned, the typology and rationale of urban gardening was rapidly changing so as to include a growing number of community gardens with social and political aims. Internally, in 2008, the right wing Mayor Giovanni Alemanno was elected. The new mayor had an interest in gaining political visibility on a topic – agriculture – traditionally relevant for the right wing electorate. In 2009 he moved the *Servizio Orti Urbani* to the Department of Agriculture; in 2010 the municipality created the first municipal community gardens in *Via della Consolata*, and the “mayor’s allotment” was inaugurated in the Campidoglio hill (the official seat of the municipality of Rome), following the example of Michelle Obama’s vegetable garden in the U.S. White House. At the same time, during Alemanno’s term, the *Servizio Orti Urbani* was downgraded to a simple office in 2009; furthermore, from 2009 to 2012 the office was heavily understaffed and left vacant for some time.

In 2012 a new public official was put in charge of the *Ufficio Orti Urbani*. The office’s new staff invested in creating relationships with several associations; in the same year, the municipality assigned a first group of areas for community gardening. Such assignment was done informally, due to the lack of formal regulations. Moreover, the municipality participated in three EU-funded projects on community gardening.³ These projects offered an important framework for developing a dialogue between the municipality and the city’s community gardeners. Consequently, the regulation approved in 2015 is not only an answer to the “bottom-up” pressure of community gardeners’ associations, but it is also the result of increasing interest from the municipality. The regulation was drafted by the *Ufficio Orti*

³ EU’GO (January 2012 - December 2013); Gardeniser (October 2013 - October 2015) and Sidig Med (November 2013 - November 2015, but further extended).

Urbani, inspired by similar regulations in other European cities, and by the guidelines already produced by the activists in Rome. Furthermore, a process for the consultation of citizens regarding the regulation was established. The regulation discursively frames community gardens as means to protect the environment, fight poverty and social exclusion and educate young people. The regulation establishes that public land will be offered as free community gardens, in coherence with the city's masterplan (Art. 5). Areas can be assigned to associations (with a formal legal status), for a duration of six years (renewable once). The municipality can revoke the assignment at any time, due to "supervening grounds of public interest" (Art. 8). The regulation also includes specific technical rules for the management of community gardens, including an obligation for organic cultivation as well as the need to have direct access to water sources. Moreover, it establishes that community gardens cannot build permanent structures and that produce from the gardens cannot be commercialized (Art. 10). The regulation was approved under the guidance of left wing Mayor Ignazio Marino (elected in June 2013). As with Mayor Alemanno, Marino also "politicized" community gardens, celebrating the approval of the regulation as an important political success.⁴ However, the approval was one of the last acts of his administration as Marino resigned in October 2015. Implementing the regulation before his administration left was not possible and it is currently at a standstill.

The regulation on community gardening: progress and contradiction

This section presents the results from the interviews with local stakeholders. In some respects, interviewees agreed that the regulation described above represents a step towards the recognition of the role of community gardening in Rome. Its approval legitimized the existence of community gardens, and was also due to a virtuous encounter between the needs expressed by grassroots initiatives and the municipality.

A thorough evaluation of the approved, yet not implemented, regulation is not possible. However, some problems are already visible within and

⁴ A video published by mayor Marino in its personal website announcing the approval of the regulation: <https://www.facebook.com/ignaziomarino/videos/10153188566539217/>. The mayor celebrates Urban Gardens making reference to healthy food and a life close to nature, and he ensures that the regulation will make it easier for citizens to organize urban gardens.

beyond the text of the regulation, and these are generating tensions between community gardens and public institutions. Firstly, according to our interviews, meeting some provisions of the regulation is particularly complicated. For example, in order to gain access to the water supply, a specific authorization has to be first approved and issued by other offices of the municipality. Legally obtaining this authorization for direct access to a water supply requires high upfront costs and is very expensive for associations. Considering the overall limited duration of the concession and the risk of revocation on "supervening grounds of public interest", these expenses can hardly be justified. A critical issue raised by several interlocutors is that, according to the regulation (Art. 5), community gardens have to be located in coherence with the city's Masterplan. This provision was especially contested by activists who claim that it was not included in the first draft of the regulation presented for public discussion. Furthermore, they lament this provision because community gardens cannot build permanent structures and, consequently, they claim that there is no necessity to be subjected to the masterplan.

Moreover, access to public information on this issue is almost impossible to obtain. Particularly from the perspective of activists, the main problem with this regulation lies "outside" the actual text, and has to do with the lack of transparency in managing green areas in the city. While other cities have detailed and open access information about the "green" destination of some areas, this does not happen in Rome. Some of our interviewees perceived this as being due to the critical relevance of this information in a city where real estate is the one of the most remunerative economic activities, and where real estate developers have an extremely powerful lobby. This lack of transparency makes obtaining legal assignment for land extremely difficult, if not near impossible, for many of the existing community gardens because it makes it very difficult for the associations to understand where it is possible for them to create community gardens, if the places they occupied de facto could actually be occupied and if, ultimately, the implementation of the regulation will strengthen or constrain their activity.

Finally, according to many interviewees, the specific problems related to community gardens, and the regulation of 2015, are further exacerbated by general inefficiencies and internal tensions at the

municipal level. The municipality of Rome is divided into 15 sub-urban districts - each with its own President, Council and administrative structure - that often claim a lack of adequate resources and capacities to fulfill their responsibilities. These internal tensions among different levels of governance affect citizens and associations, making it difficult to identify the right interlocutors and, in many cases, extending the time needed for any process. Further tensions often exist between the political and administrative levels of the municipality. On paper, technical offices work as bridges between associations and the political level but there are also cases of internal tensions between the political (which mainly pursues visibility and political returns) and the technical (that is more embedded in the associations' needs and vision).

Conclusions

The analysis presented in the paper shows that the municipality of Rome promotes community gardening, in particular in terms of political discourse. Both Mayor Alemanno and Mayor Marino, despite the differences in their political background, emphasized the relevance of community gardening for the production of healthy food, for saving money, for re-establishing a relationship with nature and for the promotion of social inclusion and participation. As a consequence, the two mayors encouraged the spread of community gardening in the city through several acts: the empowerment of the *Ufficio Orti Urbani*, the establishment of municipality allotments, the "informal" assignment of green abandoned spaces to citizens for community gardening and, finally, the approval of a formal regulation on community gardening which was requested by local associations and activists in order to be formally recognized as stakeholders in the public sphere. The regulation was presented by Mayor Marino as a crucial document that was going to make it easier and safer for citizens to actually do community gardening.

At the same time, the analysis of the regulation sheds light on the mechanisms of control and limitation that it contains. The accomplishment of some provisions is particularly complicated, or discouraging to citizens who need to invest time and money in creating a community garden. A specific case is related to the masterplan which clearly clashes with a lack of transparency that characterizes Rome in the management of green areas. Overall, according to local activists,

some of the provisions included in the regulation represent a threat to the survival of community gardening in the city –paradoxical for a regulation presented as an instrument for the diffusion of these kinds of practices.

The peculiar situation of this regulation can be partially ascribed to the level of bureaucracy and complexity in the city of Rome, but, in a wider perspective, we think it reflects the ambiguities inherent to community gardening. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main contradictions related to the role community gardens play in cities of the global North is between interpreting them as a way for citizens to challenge the dominant power relations and claim rights to the city or, conversely, as forms of collaborative government used to reduce state responsibilities in social service provision in a context of neo-liberalization. These two apparently conflicting interpretations often coexist in the politics and practices of community gardening, producing ambiguous and ambivalent effects. In the case of Rome, on the one hand, the municipality sincerely wishes to support community gardening for its social, economic and environmental benefits and for its capacity to regenerate relevant portions of the city with no cost to the public. On the other hand, the “right to the city” implicitly (or explicitly) claimed by community gardeners has to be controlled and limited, in particular, when it comes to the management of green areas in a city where the real estate development lobby is particularly powerful and influential.

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