Introduction

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Cities and agriculture seem two incompatible worlds. Yet we are seeing more and more urban agricultural projects taking shape. Are these attempts to feed city-dwellers, who will account for three-quarters of our planet’s population by the middle of the century? Far from it. Urban and peri-urban agriculture will never produce enough and will, at best, account for a few percent of global food production. But these few percentage points could make the difference locally in the event of a farming sector crisis. Very few cities have followed Havana and Singapore in choosing a productivist model for urban agriculture. What is so striking about this agriculture is the extreme diversity of the forms it takes. It can be open air or indoor, in carefully sealed, protected and controlled environments. It can be horizontal, like the community gardens of São Paulo, or vertical like in New York. At ground level or in cellars or basements. Manual, like in Addis Ababa or robotized and automated like the farming factories of Japan. It can be on standalone plots or incorporated into existing buildings. It may be designed to reduce food bills for poor families, like in Quito or, conversely, to supply premium produce sold at high prices, like in Brussels. Its objective may be leisure, education or production. It can use simple ancestral models or the latest technologies to maximize yields and minimize inputs. Its inspiration may come from conventional agriculture, hydroponics, aeroponics, permaculture, and more.

Booming it may be, but there are a number of challenges that urban agriculture needs to address. These include becoming more professional, and recruiting and training competent workers. It has to find profitable business models – because growing in the city is expensive – and ensure that its produce is safe and does not reintroduce multiple urban pollutants into the food chain. Lastly, and most importantly, urban agriculture has to find ways to compete for land with other more profitable projects. This is why it needs active support from municipalities, which must embed urban agriculture into their planning policies.

This issue of the Veolia Institute Review – FACTS Report is a mixture of cross-disciplinary studies and reports from the field, from emerging as well as developed economies. It shines a light on the renaissance of urban and peri-urban agriculture, its changing forms and technologies, its potential and limitations.

Previously exiled beyond the city boundary, new forms of agriculture are now returning to city centers.