

URBAN FARMING AS A MEANS TO STRENGTHEN URBAN RESILIENCE DURING ECONOMIC, HEALTH AND CLIMATE RELATED SHOCKS IN COLOMBO

Jayasekara A.G.P.B¹, Drechsel P² and Chathurika J.A.S^{1*}

¹ Department of Urban Bioresources, Faculty of Urban and Aquatic Bioresources, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Gangodawila, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

² Freelance, Formerly International Water Management Institute, Sri Lanka.

*Corresponding author: surani@sjp.ac.lk

External shocks, like economic crises, pandemics and an increase in extreme climate events can add significant pressure on the need of cities to provide an uninterrupted food supply. This was experienced globally under COVID-19 and even more in Sri Lanka due to its economic crisis. Urban farming gained momentum in Colombo during these crises, but support declined once conditions normalized. This study aimed to explore the applicability of global experiences with the integration of urban agriculture into urban planning could inform resilience-oriented urban development in Colombo, and to evaluate stakeholder perceptions on institutionalizing urban agriculture as a long-term urban development strategy. A mixed methods approach was employed, combining a literature survey of Global South with primary stakeholder data. A questionnaire survey of 400 urban consumers was conducted across six spatial zones distinguished by combinations of population density (high, medium, low) and income level (high, low) in the Colombo District, complemented by 62 *Key Informant Interviews* with government officials, academic experts, government-supported urban producers, and urban agriculture-related small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS software, applying descriptive and inferential statistics; qualitative responses were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that 52% of randomly selected consumers were engaged in urban farming. Despite 96% of farming households acknowledged crisis-period benefits, 78% received no institutional support. Between 87% and 95% of farming and non-farming consumers supported continuous public promotion of urban agriculture. Among non-farming consumers, 40% expressed willingness to start urban farming; and despite space constraints being the most cited barrier, regression analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between space constraints and willingness to farm, suggesting that space-constrained residents remain motivated and are potentially open to space-efficient alternatives such as rooftop and vertical farming. Urban agriculture engagement showed no significant relationship with gender or age, indicating that farming in Colombo cuts across demographic groups. Across all stakeholder groups, limited policy integration, weak institutional coordination, inadequate technical support, and low public awareness were identified as key challenges. These findings collectively demonstrate that urban agriculture in Colombo is already widely practiced, crisis-responsive, and broadly endorsed across stakeholder groups, yet remains constrained by the absence of sustained institutional commitment. It is therefore recommended that urban agriculture be formally integrated into urban resilience frameworks, disaster preparedness strategies, and long-term urban development plans, supported by dedicated extension and agro-advisory services, promoting space-efficient cultivation and strengthened multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms.

Keywords: food systems, institutional support, policy, stakeholder perceptions, urban shocks