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Urban spots sprout veggies

Project has neighbourhood green spaces turned into affordable 'edible' landscapes

MATTHEW KWONG

VANCOUVER --HIV positive and living only "by God's mercy," Maxensia Takiramule sat on the crumbling veranda in her Kampala, Uganda, neighbourhood wondering if misery was all life would ever mean to her.

The hungry widow prayed for nourishment in a capital city where 39 per cent of the population lives in absolute poverty and 43 per cent of citizens are unemployed.

It was at this moment that Ms. Takiramule was given what she described yesterday to World Urban Forum delegates as "the dream of my life." A local community leader strolled towards her and offered her an application form to participate in the Kampala City Council's "edible" landscape project --an innovative urban planning strategy that turns wasted urban spaces into vegetable gardens.

Ms. Takiramule, who was among 124 project beneficiaries, shared her account of hope amid urban poverty with a packed room yesterday during a WUF networking session on the topic of "edible" cities.

The plan's creator, McGill University architecture professor Vikram Bhatt, said that while rural areas traditionally produce food and bring it to urban centres, the goal of the edible landscapes design is to nurture a "symbiotic relationship" in cities as centres of both production and consumption.

"All open spaces become prime candidates for planning," he said, which results in a garden city concept that is also economical.

Eventually, Mr. Bhatt would like urban agriculture to be a permanent feature in housing design.

The edible lands project planner in Kampala, Margaret Azuba, envisions an agricultural hub in Uganda "where people will grow their own food and they'll grow vegetables that generate income very fast and are also well-liked ...spinach, pumpkin, local beans, celery."

Along with Colombo in Sri Lanka and the Argentine city of Rosario, Kampala is one of the three test cities selected in 2004 to use the urban agriculture model.

Delegates heard that the project is still in the early stages in Kampala, but already people are gardening in their yards, growing mushrooms in huts and installing livestock sheds.

In Rosario, where 40 per cent of the population lives in poverty, municipal council president Miguel Zamarini said, the edible landscapes project is at a very advanced stage and is seeing improvements in food security for the underprivileged.

"Urban agriculture is here to stay," he said.

The three cities were selected for the project based on their reputations as leaders on urban agriculture and because of their range of neighbourhood representation, International Development Research Centre program officer Mark Redwood explained.

Whereas Rosario's project is focused on parks and combining the community garden plots with active lifestyles so that a green space doubles as a soccer pitch, for instance, Colombo's high- density slums call for an entirely different kind of urban agriculture.

"There, they focus on a micro scale. Things like lane improvements, planting small trees, growing vertically as well, " he said.

The project is funded by the IDRC in partnership with the cities.

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