

Memorandum

"Thoughts on the situation and development of the allotment garden movement in Europe"

Office International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux a.s.b.l.

Preliminary note

Allotment gardens as we know them today arose in connection with the industrial development of Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century. Their establishment was the result of one of many efforts to improve the people's social situation during this period. The same applies to other times of hardship, in particular after the First World War, when the majority of existing allotment gardens and their respective associations were created. The allotment garden movement in Europe underwent a similar development after the Second World War. Once the initial material need was overcome, however, further reasons for maintaining and creating allotment gardens arose. Urban development and not least ecological reasons now feature at the forefront. The social function of the allotment garden movement, however, has not dropped in significance.

Right from the onset, the allotment garden movement has been based on democratic principles. This is reflected in its organisation which is structured through local associations interacting on regional, national and international levels. The consolidation on an international level took place in 1926, when Luxembourg was chosen as the seat of the International Office. Today it boasts 15 national federations with over 3 million members. The International Office initiates common activities, for instance assembling contributions from allotment gardeners for Agenda 21; it coordinates the activities of the national federations and represents their interests on an international level. Under its guidance, resolutions and petitions are prepared, which are then submitted to the EU and the Council of Europe. Since 1990, the International Office benefits from an adviser status with the Council of Europe and is recognised as an ONG. The Office's efforts in both social and ecological areas are supported by the EU.

Functions of the allotment garden movement in European countries

a) in a social context

The allotment garden enables people - in the sense of Agenda 21 - to carry out a healthy activity, allowing them to gain some distance from the worries of their professional lives. This relaxation brings with it a joy of witnessing nature grow and thrive and enables physical as well as mental recuperation. The allotment garden is the ideal location for making social contacts. Family members get together to work the garden, contact is made with neighbours and acquaintances are made and valued. Lending a helping hand to neighbours is a commonly practised thing. Allotment gardens allow children to experience nature in an active manner. The association's playgrounds are where friendships are sealed with other children; special occasions such as children's parties allow children to partake in the association's activities. This enables them to widen their social skills in a children's environment. The presence of allotment gardens as school gardens or gardens for children gives rise to further educational possibilities.

Elderly garden friends experience the help of younger neighbours for the carrying out of harder work. Integration within the community of the association helps them overcome

the loneliness of old age. Many elderly people share their experience and knowledge as honorary members of the association and hence maintain their sense of self-worth and identity.

Over the past decades, many associations have created special gardens for handicapped people. Wheelchair accessible paths, raised plant and vegetable patches and tailor-made tools are all available. All this allows these people to partake in a social life via the garden. Some individual gardens have been created for blind people, to allow them also to experience the joys of nature in a social surrounding. The number of foreign members of allotment garden associations has witnessed a continuous increase over the last years. The presence of different cultures is an enriching experience for both locals and foreigners. Integration of foreign people and enhanced tolerance of foreign co-citizens are encouraged.

b) in an economic context

For low-income families, garden produce will always constitute a valuable contribution towards their livelihood. This applies in particular for periods of high unemployment and early retirement.

Garden produce also contributes towards sufficient supplies for economically disadvantaged social groups, such as single parents and the disabled. For those who can only rarely afford holiday trips, the allotment garden offers some form of replacement.

The contribution of allotment gardens to the national economy through the purchase of garden tools, seeds, etc. is also not to be underestimated.

c) in an ecological context

Allotment gardens form part of the urban green areas. As such, they contribute largely towards an improved urban climate (temperature regulation, dust consolidation), noise control and soil protection (protection of natural resources).

Ecological garden management ensures natural ecological systems with their diverse plants and animals (species diversity). Adequate fertilisation and natural plant protection enhances necessary soil and ground water protection.

Expert advisers on all levels of the allotment garden organisation combine theory and practice to achieve an ecologically justifiable garden management. In this respect they particularly contribute towards heightening the awareness of the allotment gardener to environmental issues and to converting Agenda 21 in the local area. The required environmental knowledge is distributed via nature protection and environment seminars, which are organised by the allotment garden federations on all organisational levels, and the realisation of the aims laid out in Agenda 21 is persistently reinforced.

What the allotment garden organisations demand from politics

a) legal policies and legislative measures

Many lands are still in need of legal policies or other legislative measures to secure the status of allotment gardens as part of the public green areas in the communes.

This can be achieved through identifying the allotment gardens in development plans or through other forms of securing the long-term use of garden plots.

The presence of substitute land in case of other use of garden land, for instance for housing or industrial areas or other infrastructure measures, is indispensable.

In many countries updating of allotment garden requirement plans, in particular with construction of rental apartments, is nowadays just as necessary as in former days.

In many countries the limitation of the lease is a significant factor in securing the allotment garden movement.

Only this can guarantee that lower-income earners can also in future lease an allotment garden. In addition there is also the danger that in times of financial need communes try and offload further financial burdens onto the allotment gardeners. The cooperation of the allotment gardeners in all relevant committees of communal autonomy is therefore urgently required and supports the concerns in the sense of Agenda 21.

b) ideas and material support

In times where the government is gradually pulling out of many areas of society, an increased strengthening of honorary activity is urgently required. This is the only way the quality of the public-social life can be upheld in the interest of all citizens. A privileged tax position for honorary activities can serve this purpose.

Financial support of allotment garden associations and federations to maintain and develop the facilities accessible to all their citizens such as association houses, playgrounds, public green areas and paths, is absolutely essential.

This is the only way to secure the long-term presence of the above-mentioned facilities promoting the community.

Expert advice seminars on all organisational levels are particularly important, as well as primary projects such as learning gardens, school gardens, extensive soil analysis for harmful substances etc.

Final comment

Throughout the entire world gardens have always played a significant role in cultural development. Allotment gardens are part of the diverse range of gardens. They are the result of a deplorable social state of affairs during the industrial development of the nineteenth century. In addition to the currently still necessary social functions they fulfill, allotment gardens represent a major factor in modern urban development as well as for the contribution towards a healthy environment. The allotment garden phenomenon realises the aims of Agenda 21 in an effective manner.