

The role and position of agriculture in a strongly urbanised peri-urban area

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Europe is a highly urbanized continent and more than 75% of the population lives in urban areas today. Urban development however is hard to predict or even to describe. It does not happen in neatly defined concentric rings around one urban core but rather in complex and diffuse patterns. Accompanying this urban growth we also notice an increase in the surface of the so-called urban fringe. Scott and Collier refer to the rural-urban fringe (RUF) as ‘that messy space where town meets countryside’ ; ‘the jigsaw of land-use, development, environment and community’ .

Traditionally the RUF has been viewed as a space to meet the needs of an urbanized society rather than a place for innovative forms of rural activities. As such policy in the RUF is often conceptualized from a very urban-centric perspective. In a first approach the RUF is viewed as a repository for an increasing set of urban infrastructure demands for housing, retail, tourism, recreation and transport. In a second approach all developments within the RUF are essentially a reaction to the large development pressure of neighboring cities. By approaching the RUF from this urban-centric perspective it is difficult to let these regions grow to their full potential. The peri-urban should therefore not be seen just as a fringe, rather it should be conceived as a new kind of multifunctional territory. We need to develop strategies, visions and plans that approach areas in the RUF as distinct entities with their own unique characteristics, assets and challenges. The dynamics of the urban-rural fringe may also provide opportunities for establishing new, mutually beneficial relationships between neighboring land uses e.g. by providing new sources of income from farmers through the production of food, water, energy and recreational spaces.

Within this paper explore the opportunities for agriculture in the rural-urban fringe. Can agriculture play a role in defining strategies and plans for the future development of RUF areas? We studied the position of agriculture in the rural-urban fringe of two Flemish cities (Kortrijk and Antwerp). First of all, an inventory was made of all activities that take place on farms and that take advantage of the unique location and characteristics of their location. In a second step in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion resulted in some first steps towards the development of a vision for agriculture in the RUF.