Investigating cultural sustainability in urban agriculture: the case of Ghent, Belgium

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Current mainstream food systems are increasingly under pressure, and the number of new production and consumption activities that challenge the neoliberal food systems is constantly increasing. These activities (may) contribute to a transition towards more sustainable food systems. Urban agriculture is the umbrella term for a diverse number of activities, ranging from community supported agriculture, balcony gardening and short food supply chains, to high-tech rooftop horticulture. The attractiveness of these lies in their contribution to a myriad development goals, such as localization of food systems, social inclusion and climate mitigation. If and how these contributions are more or less driven by or linked with culture (cultural values, attitudes and practices), remains often hidden in the analysis of food systems.

This paper analyses urban agriculture with the use of a recently developed conceptual framework that combines ‘sustainable development’ and ‘culture’. These concepts have been widely discussed in scientific debates, but until now only rarely combined. The framework introduces three different combinations of culture and sustainable development: culture as ‘a fourth pillar’ of sustainable development, alongside the ecological, social and economic pillars; ‘culture as a catalyst’ in sustainable development; and ‘sustainable culture’ when sustainable development is fully embedded in culture. This framework will be operationalised to explore the cultural aspects/dimensions related to Urban agriculture in Ghent, Belgium. Consequently, the paper will contribute to a more theoretical discussion on food systems in an urbanised context and empirically to the role of urban agriculture in sustainable transitions.