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Learning for Sustainability - a challenge for City Farms

Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development are rich concepts for the theme of "Farming the City"

The Dutch Programme

The Dutch Programme 'Learning for Sustainability' has its roots in environmental education. Since 1992 several ministries in the Netherlands supported a national programme on Environmental Education, which has led to implementation of Nature, Ecology and Environmental issues in School curricula and in the development of advanced programmes and educational products. Local and regional authorities are key-players in stimulating a practical working out in places as you will visit: City Farms, School gardens, Centres for Environmental Education.

In the late nineties the co-operation with other partners such as social and cultural work, youth work and the interdepartmental work with other local services (such as public services, green keepers and environmental affairs) grows, also under the influence of Local Agenda 21. During this process some serious reflection was done on the role of city farms, school gardens and centres for environmental education. They are not the goals in themselves, but instruments for the educational and sustainable development.

In 2000 a new programme started: 'Learning for Sustainability', a co-operation between four ministries, provincial and local authorities and water boards; creating an inter-departmental and inter-managerial process with a focus on decentralising their work. About 17 million Euro is available for a 4-year period.

Many new issues are hidden in the programme title: 'Learning for Sustainability'

The central concept is Sustainability or Sustainable Development, much wider than Nature, Environment or Ecology. Sustainability: what it means for our work. One description: a well-balanced development of the three perspectives Economy, Ecology (physical living environment) and Society; in popular language: the 'triple P'- People, Planet, Profit. Well-balanced means also that future generations and developing countries can supply their needs. Not only the "here and now" is important, but also the "there and then". This makes sustainability a complex and rich concept, which addresses the consideration of interests, opinions, norms and values of different stakeholders.

In a City like Rotterdam, nature or ecology is not the first subject on the agenda, but the economy, jobs, housing, welfare and well-being. People want to talk about the quality of their lives, of their surroundings, the quality of society. Concepts such as liveability and sustainability can make the bridge between the discussions in civil society and our efforts to promote a more environmental-friendly lifestyle -connecting the well-being of our earth to the well-being of people.

That 'Learning' is a richer concept than 'Education', as education is associated with school and formal courses. The practice of City farms provides a more recreational way of presentation and an approach as "learning is fun" attracts more people and achieves a broader audience. But that is not the reason to take in consideration the concept "learning" more than "education". It is because you have to take into account for which purpose you will organise your activities!



The programme of 'Learning for Sustainability' has four approaches to learning activities.

Learning as an pedagogical challenge :

we want to give people more knowledge, information, experiences, work with them on attitudes, on values. Answers to their questions, food for the mind, fulfil curiosity. Of course we hope that with our information and lessons people will choose for a nature- friendly way of life, but that is their own conclusion. Our first concern is to create a learning place where people can meet nature and learn about it. This is a familiar process in our daily work.

Learning as a tool for policy: (nature, environmental, sustainable).

In this perspective not the learning question of our students, visitors, or clients is the central issue but a policy document, such as a local or regional Environmental Policy, or a new nature management plan. In our educational programmes we want to give backgrounds, facts, information about regulations and measures, so that people will know about the policy and will change their behaviour in favour of more sustainable practices.

Social Learning as a vehicle for public debate:

We are more and more a Civil Society where is a constant discussion about all kinds of social desires and lifestyles. The world of Politics, Policy and Enterprise is mixed up with the opinions of the citizens in their role as consumer, as involved participants. But how and where is the social debate organised ? In subjects as sustainability, but more down to earth in subjects as food, agriculture, health, environment, nature, there is an important role for places like city farms to be a focus point 'of social learning process. People need access to empowerment to be really involved, and learning by doing is a powerful instrument in that perspective.

Learning by example:

Inspiring examples - sometimes in unexpected places - contribute to a sustainable way of life. In a System of knowledge management you can share good ideas and avoid 'reinventing the wheel'. Knowledge management also requires a knowledge infrastructure and facilities such as city farms and centres for environmental education can play such a role.

Perhaps a rather abstract and theoretical approach, but I think its is very important that you can deal with such questions and can translate them in practices. Thinking about your work in the context of concepts as "sustainability" or "learning" can help you to determine your position, and monitor and evaluate your services and activities. Politicians, governmental officials, managers, they all want to know what they are getting for the money.

Why investments in city farms, why investments in educational programmes, what is their contribution to society, what is their contribution to policy and why should it be worth a public investment rather than a private initiative?

Feedback

In my work in Rotterdam feedback from aldermen, councillors or other politicians, saying: "what a nice place this farm is" or "you 're doing such nice things with children". But they need to be sayings: "you're playing such an important role in the neighbourhood" or "you are of great value in assisting implementing policies" This form of feedback leads to both status and additional funding!

Visiting city Farms

When you visit a few city farms, educational gardens, and centres for environmental education, what do you see? Hopefully more than just the buildings, more than just the animals and plants, more than the nature-trails, the tool-kits and excursion equipment? More than just a nice chat with colleagues, telling how wonderful this work is? You should see an effective organisation, both physical and mental, both in material and in persons that contribute to a more sustainable society.

And bring into practice the theory. That brings me to the roles of city farms, roles that you perhaps can arrange in the context of theory about sustainability and learning.



The role(s) of City Farms in Learning for Sustainability

In this perspective I would like to set some ideas of the surroundings. We are talking about the City, and Rotterdam is a big one. 1,2 million inhabitants in this area, taking the regional scale into account. Sometimes a very dense population, people from many different background and cultures, a surrounding of brick and concrete, of industry and business, busy traffic, working and living in a concentrated way. Place for parks and "green"? Yes. Real nature? No. How can you in such a situation connect people with the earth they are living on?

First Hand Experiences

Marjan Margadant, Professor of Environmental Education, University of Utrecht, advocates the importance of first hand experiences. In the development of children it is important to experience nature, engage in hands-on activities, 'learn through play' and 'learn by doing'. Television, video and computer are giving us an overload of information. The use of all our senses in a concrete situation is sometimes a rare moment. I saw children aged 6 just panic in seeing a chicken, children who have never caressed a sheep and children aged 12 who had never been to the seaside, just 25 kilometres in the west. There is a growing disconnection between people and nature in the cities. Professor Margadant is especially concerned because the experiences of children at young age are extremely important in forming the mind-map and developing norms and values concerning nature and their environment. If we don't have places like city farms we grow a generation people, not only ignorant of nature and ecology, but also incapable of interpretation of concepts as sustainability.

The experiences can have both a recreational or educational character, the most important is that they are available. Besides contact between people and nature, city farms are also places where people can meet each other (social work!) or places of peace and quietness. In our national Nature Management Plan "nature for people, people for nature" this is one of the scarce sources of nature. These 'refuges' are important for mental well being and health. In this perspective Sustainability is worked out in more than just a plea for nature, but also connecting social aspects. Too less this kind of argumentation is seriously brought in.

Nature Education and Environmental Education

From the activities and experiences on city farms it seems a little step to nature education and environmental education. But it is not as easy as it sounds. To organise education requires skills and insights in learning processes, methods and materials that are not always available. In Rotterdam situation there are some very inspiring that city farms, educational Gardens and centres for environmental education. They are in the same organisation and often on the same locations. Farms and gardens as a living classrooms with educational skills providing professional insights in materials and programmes. The interaction with schools is of high standard. This is not the case in all city farms in the Netherlands, and therefore in earlier national programmes there was a course for implementing environmental education as a new skill in city farms. The value of co-operation between city farms and professional educational workers should not be underestimated..

Another issue is the subject and intentions of the educational programmes. For example: do you just teach about the cow, or its products like milk, or are you presenting also a course in cheese-making, and are you introducing examples of industrial agriculture, and are you connecting this with the subject of biological farming and products, are you paying attention to the role of cattle in other cultures and countries ?

Or in other words: are you showing the ecological point of view or are you trying to connect this with economic and social elements, are you educating in the meaning of nature education, environmental education or learning for sustainability? - the impact can be great.

Information and learning for a liveable environment

Living in a city, like Rotterdam, is not always easy. The focus on income, jobs and housing, the situation of dense population, brick and concrete, industry and traffic, small amounts of green space, pollution of air, water and soil, litter and rubbish. You will find this in every city. The most important issue is how to make our neighbourhoods liveable. There are policies on - for example - nature management, in a more or less ecological way, or policies for environmental issues, such as energy-saving, sustainable building, norms for pollution, for noise, for spatial development and sustainable land-use, for sustainable water management and so on. Besides regulations, laws and financial instruments, also information, education and communication are important, particular when the behaviour of stakeholders, especially citizens, consumers,



or other division in target groups is essential.

Who are the target groups and how can you reach them? What information is important (or them and in what messages and communication can you reach them?)

City Farms, often in combination with Environmental Education Centres etc., are interesting connections in creating a communication-infrastructure.

Many people visit the farms and in that moment they are accessible for all kind of messages dealing with nature, environment and liveability. A professional approach needs to be applied to your messages, services

and projects. City Farms to invest in new and attractive learning processes and relevant networks; (with providers of policies and other stakeholders). In a world of interesting activities, being an instrument in policy communication and education there is an opportunity for a broader financing of the work of city farms.

Connection with discussions in Civil Society

In the department of Agriculture, but also in other discourses, there is discussion about the future of agriculture in the Netherlands. This includes the transition to a more sustainable way of producing, the role of farmers as manager of the landscape, the quality of food and the question of food-safety, the ethics of genetics, animal welfare, the ecological footprint in the world, vaccination of Claw- and Mouth-disease.

What is the contribution of city farms to this discussion?

- Do you show your visitors some of the facts and figures?
- Are you informing them and empower them for this discussion?

For an example: when Claw- and Mouth-disease struck the Netherlands, city farms where closed down for public. But only two serious educational programmes were brought to my attention. Programmes dealing with aspects of the virus infection, economic losses, issues of recreation and social problems in the agricultural society. Some of the city farms in Rotterdam have a fine collection of old and rare Dutch breeds, such as Lakenvelder Cows and the Barnevelder chicken. A good opportunity for the introduction of the theme biodiversity.

In some parts of Rotterdam ecological management of public green space is presented to the public by nature-trails. You can also introduce discussion and courses for public to help them participate in such a theme. Therefore an active network of actors is important and a subtle role-playing of your organisation. In this type of discussions and learning processes an interaction between ecology, economics and social aspects includes co-operation between different kind of stakeholders and participants, not easy to organise, but a demanding task when you want to take part in learning for Sustainability.

City farms are much more!

City farms are much more than nice places, giving children a good time and sometimes good information and education. City farms are potential meeting points for society in the discussions about liveability and sustainability. They can help create connections between people and our earth, between politics, policies and civil society. There is the new challenge for city farms in the process of Learning for sustainability. 'Farming the City', means looking for new roles, new products, new services and new partnerships.

The real Challenges for City Farms

To give form to the different roles that City Farms can play, I think you have to show that by different products and in different coalitions. And perhaps you are paid for different roles by different subsidies, funding and generated income. The challenges can be on three levels.

A meeting point of people and nature

First hand experiences and education. That is an obvious role that is essential and structural. You have to work this out on long term agreements and subsidies. Presentation, quality and professionalism are key - issues. Know your visitors and users, and know their needs and demands.



A place of education and communication for different target groups

What do you offer and what for? What are your services and products? Are you co-operating with other actors, such as school-gardens or centre for environmental education? And are your services and products influenced by demands from customers and users (market oriented) or do you have admission as a policy instrument, paid by - for example – by the local government? And what kind of subjects do you handle: one-dimension such as nature or multi-dimensional such as sustainability? In what context are you working, what is your network, who are your partners? The real challenge for city farms is to be aware of their own position, to be a serious and valuable equal partner in learning process (with schools, with other actors) and to develop a interesting network and/or partnership (with other NGO's, with social-cultural-work, with stakeholder organisations, etc). Depending on the possibilities you can manage project on small scale or develop programmes on middle-long term ranges.

Leader or follower?

A more difficult challenge is to play an active part, or be the initiator, of projects that enhance the social debate and develop real participation. In that case, you are in the middle of society, being a booster or drive the actuality by making connections between your core business: people and their surroundings. You are a very sensitive player in policies, in politics and in civil society. You can translate and facilitate discussions of healthcare, food-safety, genetics, biodiversity, transitions to sustainable agriculture or such abstract issues to your own situation and create a learning space, in which you offer yourself and stakeholders real empowerment to discuss, participate and come into action. This kind of work should be actual and related to policies and forces in society. It can be organised and paid for on project basis. You have to earn your position by acting in a proactive and professional way.

In practice you can often find combinations and solutions for these kind of challenges. But the most important thing is to recognise them, and give your City Farm a position as a player of importance, who can deal with complex but rich concepts as liveability, sustainability and learning processes.

"Farming the City" is a demanding task, you have to take in consideration all kinds of aspects and contexts, and find your appropriate way. A City Farms success will depend on what other people think, including:

- City Farms are valuable places where people in the city can meet, experience nature and learn about it.
- City Farms are often oases of peace and refuges for nature
- City Farms are places where you can find information about nature and environmental issues and about policies concerning, they are an important instrument.
- City Farms are places where you can discuss and learn about your own possibilities and choices, the stakeholders are using it and feel involved.
- City Farms are places where civil society meets to be empowered for their public debate.
- City Farms are places of inspiration.

The challenge is to think, plan and work in sustainable way

The Triple P is People, Profit and Planet; not forgetting the other important P's in this process such as P for Pleasure, P for Partners, P for Participation.