



What role for urban farming?

The case of Ouagadougou: preservation or relegation?

Laure Le Gall

While the benefits of farming activities in large West African cities are starting to be recognised within the scientific community, Laure Le Gall believes that urban agriculture is still struggling to find its place within public policy. The few efforts that have been made by planners in places like Ouagadougou belie a desire to contain such activities, or even to relegate them to the urban fringes.

In a context where urban space comes at a premium, agriculture is only occasionally considered a legitimate form of land use in the large cities of West Africa. Although urban farming enjoys an extensive *de facto* existence, in the most fragile and vulnerable interstitial spaces of the city, its social, economic and environmental role struggles to be recognised by local planning policies, which, inspired by Western urban models, have long separated and distinguished urban activities from those considered exclusively rural, among them farming.

The city of Ouagadougou is a prime example of the opposition that continues to exist between the city and the country, the city and nature, the city and agriculture. Much more significant than any demographic criteria, it is this functional distinction between farming and other activities that is at the heart of the way the city is defined in Burkina Faso. Like other African countries, Burkina experienced rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation in the 1960s and 1970s. Ouagadougou was the main beneficiary of this growth, essentially the result of rural exodus. Today, while growth has slowed down in large urban areas, instead favouring small and medium-sized towns, the Burkinabè capital continues to expand, informally for the most part. Accordingly, most intra-urban and periurban agricultural spaces are spontaneously developed sites with no right of occupancy. This can be explained by strict legislation (Bagré *et al.* 2001) that has only recently been relaxed following the adoption of the *Schéma Directeur* (Master Plan) for Greater Ouagadougou, revised in 2008, which recommended the allocation of wetlands for market gardening and the creation of a green belt to the south of the city. Its guidelines also include more general recommendations that commercial developments respect the natural characteristics of the land. The official line, influenced by the latest academic studies on the subject of urban agriculture, therefore promotes a new level of tolerance – but is it sincere, or all for show? The example of a site planned jointly by the local authority of Nongremasson, one of the five *arrondissements* (boroughs) of Ouagadougou, and the ONEA (Office National de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement – National Office for Water and Sanitation) provides a partial response to this question.

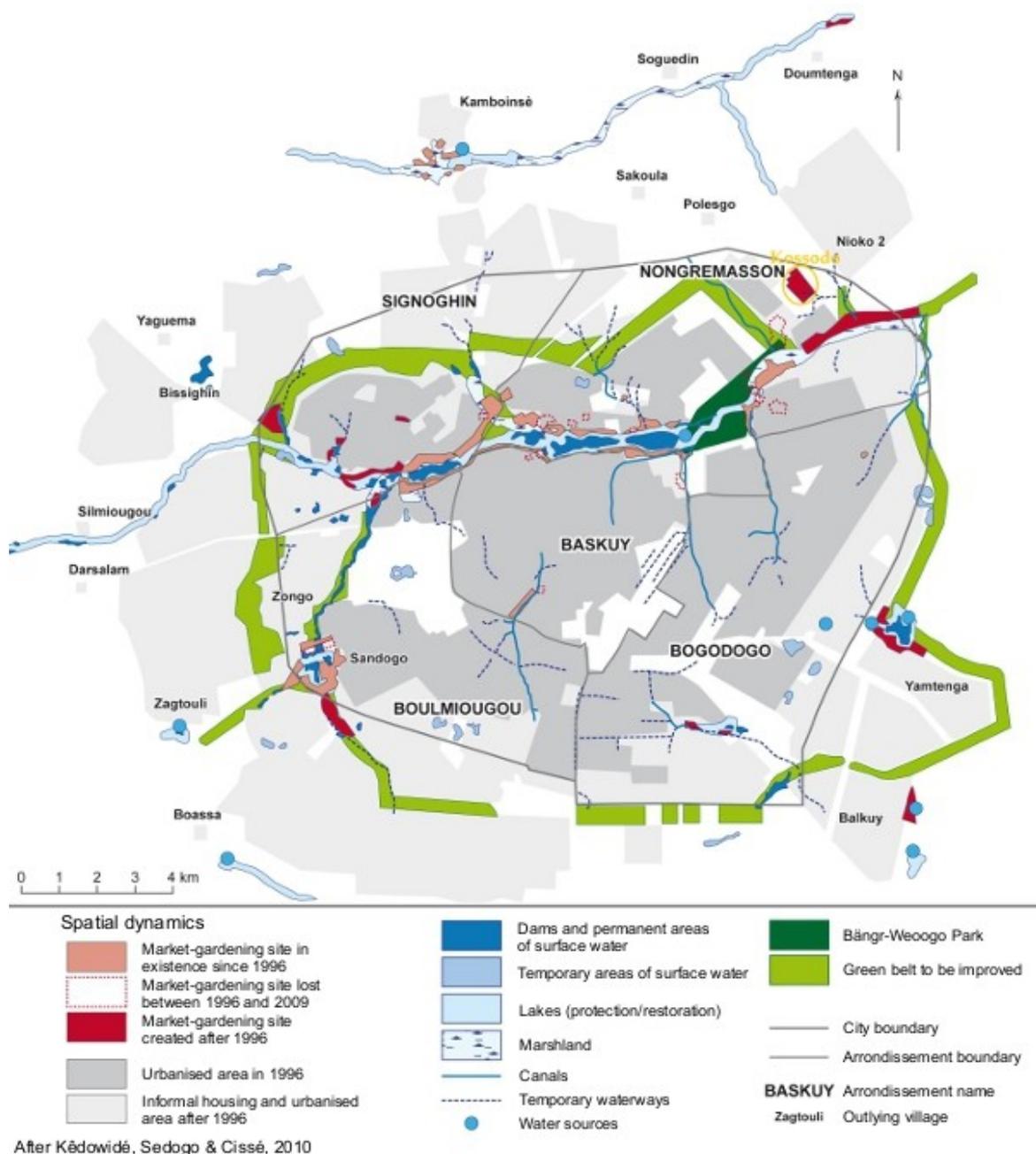
Land rights and economic security

The market-gardening site of Kossodo, on the north-eastern edge of the built-up area, within the *arrondissement* of Nongremasson, was turned over to cultivation following the creation of a sewage

treatment plant in the vicinity in 2006. The basis for this project was an area of land of around 30 hectares (75 acres), converted into farmland, that was supposed to be developed at the mouth of the main outlet channel for treated wastewater. The local council's ambitions were therefore twofold: to make use of treated water so that other growers in this industrial area no longer had to use wastewater; and to displace these very same growers from informal sites and ensure they all occupy a space specifically devoted to market gardening.

Some 605 plots of land were drawn up, marked out and allocated to farmers who requested them, with priority given to those already present on the site, most of whom were growing millet before. This allocation policy was accompanied by logistical assistance that included making a certain number of tools and equipment available, although not all growers were able to obtain these. This policy appears to reflect a real desire on the part of local bodies to support and manage farming activities. Providing land rights and ensuring economic security were therefore the spearhead actions of this agricultural planning exercise.

Spatial changes affecting market-gardening sites in Ouagadougou between 1996 and 2009



An economic failure and an unattractive site

However, by 2011, this measure was far from having achieved its objectives. A survey conducted among 60 growers showed that many of those who worked the land in the area before this measure was implemented have experienced a deterioration in their economic situation, which was already delicate before the irrigated area was created: “millet generated more money; I would have preferred to use this space for something other than market gardening,” reported one grower, for example (Le Gall 2011). While the first year’s harvests were promising, the results from the second year on were catastrophic (ONEA 2008).

Indeed, at the time of the survey – between February and April 2011 – comparisons with other agricultural sites were conclusive: cultivation at Kossodo was taking much longer, whereas crops on other, more productive sites in the city were almost ready to harvest. Worse still, the rare shoots that were emerging at Kossodo were already wilted and showing signs of rot. For these reasons, farmers based in other market-gardening areas, who were potentially facing the prospect of a move to Kossodo, were very worried and not especially keen to move. As one grower in Tanghin, another neighbourhood of Ouagadougou, put it: “if we really don’t have a choice, we’ll go to Kossodo, but quite frankly we’d really rather not.”

A negative vision of urban agriculture?

In this situation, is it possible to see the result of an implicit relegation? During the survey, two factors were identified as the primary causes of this economic failure. While the first – the high salinity levels of the irrigation water produced by the sewage treatment plant, adversely affecting the growth of crops and soil quality (Sou 2009) – appears to be altogether independent of public policy and could be resolved through improved water treatment techniques, the second seems far more structural in nature and appears to be linked to a negative vision of farming in the city (Le Gall 2011).

A plot comprising approximately 20 planting strips in Tanghin, 2011



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A plot comprising two planting strips in Kossodo, 2011



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More specifically, the way in which land is managed in the Kossodo project seems to be to blame. First, the plots allocated do not generally match growers' initial land possessions. According to the farmers surveyed, one market-garden plot was allocated for every plot of cereal crops that was previously cultivated (and which provided the whole family with work). But the two types of plot are not equivalent in terms of either yields or the employment they provide. As a result, certain family members found themselves deprived of the opportunity to work the land. Above all, though, the plots allocated were much smaller than those found in other, informal market-gardening sites in the city, as the plots at Kossodo were limited to just a few planting strips (as shown in the photographs above). This lack of space – combined with low yields due to the poor quality of the irrigation water and a lack of resources making it impossible to invest in intensifying production – therefore prevents extensive farming and severely hampers economic activity as a result.

Furthermore, as the available space is already saturated, we might question how the planned arrival of other Ouagalais growers in the long term will be managed. Even though an extension to the current site is planned, it is not certain that the project will have the capacity to absorb this extra population, especially given the current water-related problems. In addition, it must be remembered that agricultural spaces in the centre of the city continue to accommodate new growers, attracted by the relative security provided by the farming activities there.

Allocation or relegation?

Finally, the choice of site also raises certain questions. The authorities took the decision not to improve existing market-gardening sites (in more central locations), arguing that the areas in question often presented risks (landslides, flooding, pollution, etc.). However, the appropriateness of their decision to relocate these sites so far away, on the very edge of the city, is debatable. In particular, its peripheral location, far from markets and trade networks, generates additional costs that growers in central areas faced with the prospect of moving are not willing to take on.

In addition, it is highly probable that this area, currently “reserved” for agricultural activity, will not ultimately escape the competition for space currently being experienced in outlying areas of

many large African cities. Will pressure on land – already visible at the time of the survey, with industrial firms prospecting comprehensively for land around the market-gardening site – prove stronger than the farming interests of a population with little in the way of lobbying power? Forms of speculation can already be observed in internal practices within the site, indicating that the land is slowly gaining in value for its development possibilities rather than its agricultural potential.

To address shortcomings such as the clumsily subdivided land and the water-supply issues, local populations have reinstated traditional land practices such as indirect tenure, enabling a more flexible management of the available space. Through the informal loaning or renting of plots, without the agreement of the local council, market gardeners can extend their total amount of cultivable land, whereas they could only hope to receive a single plot if they made a request via the official channels. Moreover, various kinds of informal sites have sprung up just metres below the designated market-gardening zone. This speaks volumes about the success (or otherwise) of one of the key aims of the project, which was to combat such forms of unofficial land occupancy and supposedly lead to greater land security, deemed an essential step towards ensuring economic security.

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Laure Le Gall, a graduate of the Université Paris-4, where she obtained a master’s degree in “Globalisation, Spatial Dynamics and Sustainable Development in the Global South”, is currently studying for a specialised master’s degree in “Public Policy and Strategy for the Environment” (PPSE) at AgroParisTech.

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