

The Relation of Community Gardens and the Human Right to Food: A Case Study in Berlin and Rio de Janeiro

Felipe Jardim

This investigation aims to tackle problems related to the two urban resources food and land. Regarding the violation of the human right to adequate food, it addresses the issues of food availability, accessibility, acceptability, and sustainability. Then it concerns itself with the multifaceted problem of vacant land, which is contributing to social-spatial segregation and socioeconomic disparities. Given these issues, there is a demand for transformative actions to secure the rights of individuals and communities, reduce inequalities, and sustain life on our planet. One potential strategy for repurposing vacant land and advancing the realization of the right to food that global studies highlight are community gardens.

Nonetheless, a research gap exists regarding the relation between community gardens and urban food sharing, particularly in Berlin and Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, this empirical study highlights the contrasts of the urban food sharing practices (the “communing”) in community gardens in these two global cities. The central inquiry guiding this investigation is: How do the principles of the human right to food relate to food-sharing practices within Berlin’s and Rio de Janeiro’s community gardens, and what factors explain the similarities and differences within and between these cities’ practices?

The hypothesis suggests that urban food sharing within community gardens can be linked to the right to food. These connections may vary based on unique socioeconomic contexts and urban challenges in each city. To empirically assess this hypothesis, the study formulates the theoretical proposition that the human right to food, the concept of urban commons, and the establishment of community gardens serve as mechanisms for addressing urban land and food crises. In-depth empirical investigations between 2019–23 characterized community gardens’ territorial and sociodemographic profiles and engaged with gardeners and experts. Interviews and questionnaires were administered to 40 participants (20 individuals from each city). The data had a thematic coding and analysis, a combined approach between case study and content-analysis methods to produce information, insights, and arguments from the sources of evidence by deductive and inductive reasoning. It investigated several similar and different urban food sharing activities within and between the same cities. The results demonstrated that, in Berlin, community gardeners and experts’ motivations primarily focus on socialization and environmental concerns, while, in Rio de Janeiro, the primary focus lies on food security, followed by ecological and economic topics. An unexpected finding was that, in Berlin, employment opportunities in enhancing food accessibility and the economic dimension of food sustainability are important for gardeners. Conversely, in Rio de Janeiro, one community garden is used to promote gender empowerment (social sustainability). Acknowledging certain limitations, especially due the COVID-19 pandemic, the study confirmed the hypothesis that food sharing practices contribute to different dimensions of the right to food, with variations based on specific socioeconomic contexts. However, agroecological food production emerged as a unifying factor across both cities, demonstrating a shared commitment to sustainable practices. This suggests a significant international step toward social-ecological transformation in urban food and land management. The findings expand the existing literature on the role of urban agriculture and alert for the necessary promotion and protection of community gardens.