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**AESOP SUSTAINABLE FOOD
PLANNING WORKSHOP 2018**

**Towards sustainable
City Region Food Systems**



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AESOP SUSTAINABLE FOOD PLANNING WORKSHOP 2018

Towards sustainable City Region Food Systems

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WHERE ARE THE POST-COMMUNIST ALLOTMENT GARDENS HEADING?

(FOCUS POINT ON THE CZECH REPUBLIC)

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Abstract. *This paper provides an excursion to the urban allotment gardens' specifics in a country located in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The paper introduces briefly the key aspects of historical overview of allotments in former Czechoslovakia and defines significant periods which influenced urban gardening and the society in general. We capture the main characteristics prevailing in the communist regime and consequent changes after 1989, and we also discuss diverse aspects of its decline in the Czech Republic since then. Further, we indicate contemporary trends and challenges for the future of urban allotment gardening within the context of urban and food planning. In the post-communist development we revealed some significant aspects. Radical socio-economic changes after 1989 caused shrinkage of their significance in general. Consequently, the process of looking for their new position and the role in cities is taking place. New challenges for renovation of relation among food, gardening, urban planning and life in cities arise.*

Keywords – urban gardening, allotment gardens, Czech Republic

Introduction

Allotment gardens play a significant role for sustainable food planning in cities. They support individual urban gardening and food self-provisioning of urban inhabitants. Moreover, they provide various positive social, environmental, recreational, spatial and other functions for inhabitants and urban environment (Bell *et al.*, 2016; Tóth *et al.*, 2018; Ambrožová *et al.*, 2011). They are anchored within the urban agriculture typology as the example of urban gardening level, quite properly organised, in form of garden plot lease provided by the city council or private owner, where gardeners are usually gathered within some non-profit associations (Duží *et al.*, 2017; Simon-Rojo *et al.*, 2016).

In Czechoslovakia (split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993), the allotments were continually developed mainly since 19th century. Their appearance, area and distribution within cities were changed, and mostly consisted of interactions between people (bottom-up) and administration (top-down) (Ambrožová *et al.*, 2011).

This short contribution is a reworked and shortened version of the paper elaborated by Tóth *et al.* (2018). In this case, our attention focuses more on the context of the Czech Republic.

Methods

We adopt a socio-historical approach and start the study from the 18th century, with focus on the main changes after the collapse of communist regime after 1989. We aimed to depict the key aspects that influenced the development and changes of urban allotments.

Our methods consist mainly of literature review, which includes study of scientific papers and books, master plans, annual reports, statistical publications, professional magazines, acts and legislative documents and newspapers.

The literature review has been supported by applied field research in selected allotment gardens in Ostrava, Brno, Uherské Hradiště and Karlovy



Vary, conducted in 2016. The field research included 1) visual observation of allotments in general and photo documentation, and 2) additional narrative interviews with local stakeholders (representatives of the national gardener unions, their local, district and regional branches), in order to gain a better insight into the historical development, transformations in space and time, current situation, challenges and trends.

Here are two general research questions:

What does research on urban allotments in the Czech Republic add to existing knowledge in European context? How can instruments of urban planning help to support sustainable urban food planning?

Urban allotment garden in Brno

Source: Pictures taken by the authors

Results

In case of historical analysis of allotment gardens development, we identified six key periods:

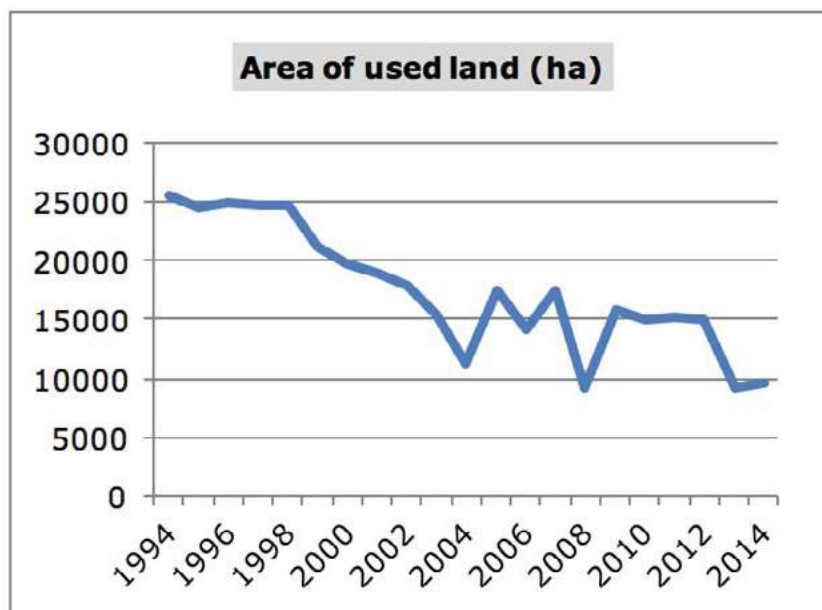
- I. 18th and 19th century: The first fruits of organised gardening and associational life;
- II. Early 20th century and the interwar period: Flourishing of civil societies and gardening associations;
- III. After 1948: Gardening as a tool of the communist regime influenced by the centrally planned development;
- IV. After 1975: Empowerment of allotments and their organised development;
- V. After 1989: The period of transition and breakup;
- VI. After 2000: Shrinking allotments, rising public engagement (for further historical details see Tóth *et al.*, 2018).

Year	1960	1979	1990/ 91	2014/ 2016
Members (CZ+SK)	101735	341218 ↑	623023 ↑	208934 ↓
Local branches (CZ+SK)	1734	5341 ↑	6975 ↑	3869 ↓

Table 1. *The trend of members and number of local branches of Czech and Slovak Gardeners Union.*

Source: Slovak Association of Gardeners (2016); Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (2016); Ambrožová et al. (2011).

Figure 1. Area used by allotment gardeners in Czech Republic.
Source: Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, 2016



The fourth period IV (1975-1989) was very interesting from the perspective of spatial planning. Allotment gardens were integrated into the urban planning process and functional master plans and were strongly supported by legislation at that time.

Especially locations unsuitable for agricultural mass production or construction were identified and allocated for allotments. These were set up with the help of gardeners, usually in the form of voluntary work called “Z action”. All gardeners had to be organized in Czechoslovak Union of Gardeners.

After the 1989, a set of radical socio-economical changes influenced the area and the importance of allotment gardens in cities as well. Many of them had to give way to new construction and changes of urban structures. Additionally, the urban inhabitants’ interest in gardening lost its strength due to changes in lifestyles and increased availability of fresh food in shops. Table 1 shows the declining trend of members and local branches of the Union.

On the other hand, food self-provisioning remained popular and socially inclusive activity among Czech urban dwellers (Vávra et al., in press). Since around 2000, new forms and types of gardens have been developing, such as community or educational gardens. Also, discussions about the future role of allotment gardens within master plans and the life of urban inhabitants take place, including attempts to approve the act on gardening. The rising public awareness on gardening, especially by the young generation is visible (for details see Tóth et al., 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper provides a short excursion to the development of allotment gardening in one of the representative states of the CEE region. We point out the fact that the communist regime was quite supportive and protective towards allotment gardening, though in a rather top-down way. Nowadays, in the contemporary democratic context and due to the communist heritage,

municipalities still have strong instruments for supporting urban allotment gardening in towns and cities.

We argue that the current position of allotments in local and regional master plans needs to be strengthened, so that allotments do not represent only provisional and spare land for further development and construction. They need to acquire a full recognition as green and blue infrastructure components, providing a wide range of valuable ecosystem services to urban inhabitants. Municipalities have to recognise that allotment gardening is a valuable recreational resource for urban inhabitants, which can supplement sports centres, playgrounds and parks.

And finally, allotment gardens would also play an important role in thinking of local food system resilience and food security.

As the current chair of Gardeners' Union fittingly points out: imagine, where food would be produced if all urban green spaces were built up? What would we do if all achievements and privileges of the modern time collapsed? (interview with Stanislav Kozlík, 2016)

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