

## **A Critical Reflection on the "Deficits to be Overcome" in Urban Agriculture in Bulgaria<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Критичен размисъл върху „дефицитите за преодоляване“ в градското земеделие в България**

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The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Авторът няма конфликт на интереси.

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<sup>1</sup> Review the book of Dona Pickard (2022). *Urban agriculture for improving the quality of life. Examples from Bulgaria*. Springer

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What are the real vs. the potential effects of urban agriculture (UA) on the welfare of communities living in the city and the close-by areas – this is amongst the main queries posited by the book "Urban Agriculture for Improving the Quality of Life. Examples from Bulgaria", edited by Donna Pickard. A multidisciplinary study that leans on scientific data and unravels the interplay between the impact of UA practices and the quality of life. Content-wise, this research involves multi-layered analyses on the subject – UA has been viewed through social, educational, economic, spatial, and ecological aspects. At the beginning of the book, there is a text about the historical dimension of UA in Bulgaria, revealing curious information about what urban agriculture looked like in the 1930s in Sofia. An intriguing find, for instance, is that people working in the newly established National Assembly raised poultry in a parliamentary annex building during the first years of their service.

The book has been awarded the scientific and applied achievement of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IPhS-BAS) for 2022 after the General Assembly of Scientists vote in January 2023. The values of this scientific work are listed below.

First, it is the theoretical concept the book relies on. The researchers have interpreted the primary data through Ruth Veenhoven's quality-of-life analytical framework, which puts forward two dichotomies—opportunities for a good life and the good life itself (2000). The authors Dona Pickard and Mariana Draganova have assembled a list of quality-of-life indicators based on academic literature. The selection of indicators has worked towards providing attested data as they relevantly dissect the interactions among urban agriculture and the social actors related to it.

Second, it is the book's worldwide profile. The research team has collaborated with a prominent publisher – Springer has been producing an urban agriculture series for years. This book has attracted the attention of the international publishing house with the deployed critical and reflexive sociological method, emphasizing that urban agriculture is not a universal remedy. Still, it has the resources and strengths to improve the quality of living in a city milieu. The publishing house has advised the authors to consider issues applicable in most world contexts. Fortunately, these recommendations have been taken into account in the accomplished book. Among these matters are balancing the roles between all involved social actors and "the deficits to be overcome" in UA (e.g., pollution, the space for new developments, the absence of business skills among potential urban farmers, and so forth).

Another reason for this work's success is its scientific impact. The manuscript presents an empirical study utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The reliable sociological information from the representative survey among 750 residents in three Sofia districts manages to respond to queries of all interested parties (i.e., researchers, urban agriculture practitioners, and local authorities), namely what is the share of people interested in UA activities, what is their motivation, and which way practicing UA could contribute to solving poverty, social exclusion, inequalities, unhealthy living environment, among others.

Yet another strength of this book is that it demonstrates a 360-degree overview of different matters surrounding the subject by collecting diverse expertise. Apart from sociologists, the editor welcomes the collaborative perspective of ecologists, biologists, and landscape architects. What could be named an unexpected positive externality is that the team, which explored the spatial and ecological layer of urban agriculture, noticed unusual behavior among the representatives of a butterfly species in the observed gardens. This new scientific knowledge is described in the ecological chapter of the book. In addition, it is cited in a Polish Wikipedia page dedicated to this butterfly species.

The fifth strong point of this publication – despite being entirely grounded on data received from the Bulgarian capital, it could also be valuable and informative for other audiences across the country, as well as from various locations in Europe and beyond. A practical tool – the questionnaire at the end of the book, serves as the author's compliment to the readers. The latter enables households or groups of starters in UA to self-evaluate their capacity to alter local communities' quality of life positively. The tool is insightful and pertinent to any part of the world where people embark on urban agriculture.

The book's contribution is manifold. On the one hand, its theoretical input is set towards urban agriculture studies, improving UA's quality of life and economic, social, and ecological benefits. On the other hand, the hardcover has an applied academic imprint through (1) being beneficial from a global perspective (2) smoothly preparing the ground for the comparative scholarship between Bulgaria and other countries of similar practice (the check with international literature showed that Bulgarian data are entirely verifiable and attested). In short, this work sends a message to further the academic interchange on the subject.

On a practical note, the reader can see a developed instrument applicable and viable for the self-assessment of UA stakeholders to reflect on their day-to-day activities. Not least to mention,

the analyzed information has assisted the non-profit association Citizens' Initiative for Urban Agriculture, which has been advocating before the local authorities for adopting regulatory mechanisms regarding UA. The scientific numbers have also helped the City of Sofia to argue adjustments in regulations related to green areas.

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