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Suburban Food Farms: What contribution can they make in reducing the environmental impact of the current oil-based decentralised food network?

Why have I chosen this thesis topic?

Large metropolitan areas such as Merseyside (Liverpool/Wirral) have a significant suburban area which is less dense than the central area of the city. Suburbs have historically been seen as "greener" areas without actually being in the countryside. Land prices may be lower and are likely to have some allotments and food producing gardens. Many inhabitants of these areas may have moved out of the city for the extra space. Inhabitants of the suburbs may have high energy usage as they are likely to work, socialise and shop either in the nearest city centre or other neighbouring towns and cities.

At the same time as growth has occurred in suburbs, local food producers such as market gardens have disappeared in recent decades as a result of large scale agriculture based on cheap fossil-fuel based food production. This has brought about a disconnection with food, seasonality, local crops and diet. Food price wars led by supermarkets have engendered an unsustainable view of food cost which has also led to large amounts of food being thrown away.

Other countries show that the outskirts of the city can play a major role in providing food. In Beijing and Shanghai most of the fruit and vegetables still comes from within the city limits. There was also the situation in Cuba where they shifted from a fertiliser based system to a labour intensive very quickly. There are also examples of suburbs in the US and Europe where similar systems have been shown to have worked. Furthermore, northern UK regions such as Merseyside have suffered in past decades with high unemployment and other social issues due to the collapse of heavy industry. The current thinking is to produce economic growth through industry such as call centres and part-time supermarket jobs.

As commodity and food prices increase, peri-urban agriculture may be a viable way of reducing the environmental impacts associated with food production and at the same time boosting and transforming the local economy.

Literature and Research review

- Historical review of the way food was distributed pre-supermarkets in this area and the decline of the local food of production.
- How the current food system works through centralised transport systems.
- Research small schemes in cities on the outskirts of UK cities for small scale schemes and see how it works.
- UK and European policy regarding land and food production (CAP)

What methods will I use?

- Measure available green space in one "representative" suburb by using GIS mapping data, regional spatial and local authority plans.
- Calculate yield by interviewing local growers such as allotment holders and small scale farmers. Also find out about soil type, suitable crops and seasonal information.
- If required, use photographical investigation to examine the suitability of sites.
- Investigate environment impact of current food supply and food requirements of population.
- Review the above and extrapolate for the whole region.

Relevance to Wider environmental debate.

- Reductions of CO2 – and improve ecological footprint of the city.
- Consider food cycle and reduce packaging, transportation, fossil fuel inputs.
- Re-skilling and resilience of local economy.
- Health and societal benefits.

What do I want to achieve?

- Talk to council and help produce a local "food" plan
- Maybe involve schools, grow on land and monitoring