



Article

Polish Urban Allotment Gardens as ‘Slow City’ Enclaves

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Abstract: In this article, urban allotment gardens (UAGs) are discussed as one of the alternative urban development frameworks - Slow City. The UAG concept as well as the Slow City agenda aims to protect and enhance strong community relationships, decision making, civil engagement, group learning, and leisure practices for people of all ages in close proximity to green spaces. The authors argue that the statutory aims, organizational culture, and governance rules of UAGs are largely coherent with the formal Slow City agenda. The authors analyze the threats to sustainable cities and the alternative urban development agendas in the context of Polish allotment gardens. With increasing problems of soil pollution, abandoned gardens, informal housing, and limitation of access to the green areas of the UAGs for other inhabitants, the pressure to reduce the number of UAGs is reinforced.

Keywords: urban allotment gardens; Slow City; Poland; sustainable cities

1. Introduction

The role of urban allotment gardens (UAGs) in ensuring urban sustainability has been discussed in recent studies [1–3]. Studies on UAGs mostly emphasize on their positive features – the importance of gardens in urban ecosystems and their function in the hydrological and biogeochemical cycles, air quality regulation, noise reduction, biodiversity sustenance, and biohabitat availability [4,5], furthermore, their socio-economic role, and their impact on property value, food supply, and providing recreational areas and social security through access for the excluded and poorer groups [6]. The significance of UAGs has been increasing in recent years. With their increased popularity, alternative solutions have become more or less coherent concepts and consequently a subject of interest for urban theorists, planners and researchers [7,8].

The position of UAGs, not only in Central and Eastern European countries, is related both to the heritage of sociable city planning and also to the attitudes of gardeners resisting economic pressures. This particular situation requires more careful analysis. For this purpose, we refer to the concept of Slow City [9–12], which we argue, addresses at least some of the challenges associated with sustainable and alternative urban development frameworks. We are aware that the term Slow City is associated with the movement that organizes small and medium-sized cities, but it applies to large cities and/or metropolitan areas as well. Slow City is a term describing the strategy for preserving sustainable urban development [13] or making alternative urban development strategies and regimes [9]. In this sense, the concept of Slow City is a reference point, a postulate to be implemented not only in the whole city, but also in selected spheres of its functioning or in particular areas. These are called Slow City enclaves and are socio-spatial structures of the city that function according to the Cittaslow Charter. Slow City enclaves are objectively and subjectively built and defined in relation to the urban environment. Different cities develop their own concept of ‘slow’, in relation to local and available resources, and not only to environmental issues, but also to internal differences within the city. As Mara Miele [13] states,

producing boundaries is typical of the entire Slow City movement, as ‘slow practices, slow objects, and the spaces of slowness co-exist with other practices, objects, and spaces of standardization’. We argue, therefore, that the differences between UAGs and other functional and social areas of the city are due to the ‘Slow City’ concept which comprises a distinct organization, an ecological approach, principles of spatial management, and ownership relations.

The concept of sustainable development has gradually become a catalyst for a new paradigm and for the creation of the Slow movement [14,15]. The most widely recognized and institutionalized program of the Slow movement is Slow Food. What began in Italy in 1986 by Carlo Petrini as a reaction against “fast food”, has become a global movement against speed, one of the pillars of modernity [12]. The Slow movement, the core of which was the Slow Food movement, relates to both, micro-social issues like individual practices, cultural habits, and emotions [10] and macro-social issues such as social classes, politics, economy [16], and technology [13]. The work of the movement, pertaining to the ‘slow’ concept, is carried out in the sphere of individual identity in relation to bodily habits, the organization of time, the ‘cult of speed’ [17], and emotions [18]. Other authors have pointed out the political dimension of the Slow Food movement, which is the realization of the ‘right to pleasure’ [19] resulting from citizens’ expectations of the protection of moral aspects, local values, economic development, and environmental protection.

The Slow Cities movement adopts the principles of Slow Food and seeks to apply them to local communities and to the governance of towns [20]. The Slow City (Cittaslow) movement was established in 1999 in Orvieto by four Italian towns. As of April 2017, Slow Cities have grown into a global network of 233 cities in 30 countries [21]. The Slow City agenda aims to protect and enhance strong community relationships, decision making, civil engagement, group learning, and leisure practices for people of all ages, in close contact with green, healthy and open spaces. In this context, we perceive UAGs as community-controlled green enclaves as opposed to the pressure of neoliberal urbanism.

The Slow City network consists of towns with less than 50,000 people who are committed to working on several policies like energy and environment, urban infrastructure, quality of urban life, agriculture, tourism, crafting, hospitality, and awareness training, social cohesion and partnerships [11]. The Polish urban allotment movement is not officially or formally connected with the Slow City movement because of insufficient legal form, however, we argue that it is largely coherent with the Slow City agenda.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this article is to examine if the urban allotment gardens in Poland can be perceived as Slow City enclaves. The primary research question concerns whether the statutory aims, organizational culture, and governance rules of UAGs are coherent with the Slow City agenda. If yes, what are the key threats to the functioning of urban allotments in Poland. We are aware of the limitations of our case study, however, to some extent, the functions and administrative guidelines of UAGs are similar to those in other Central and Eastern Europe countries. For more universal conclusions, one should take into account the diverse context of different countries like ownership structures, legal regulations, etc.

The study used data from the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) on the spatial development of individual cities and the number of allotments. The data pertaining to the number and area of UAGs covered the period 2014–2017 in order to indicate the slow decrease in the number of plots. The analysis of the cities (five largest Polish cities based on the total area criterion: Warszawa, Kraków, Szczecin, Łódź, and Wrocław) included our own calculations based on 2015 data from the statistical office and data made publicly available by the selected cities. Due to differences in the methodology of calculation of areas, in particular categories of green areas and limitations in comparing the share of gardens in particular cities, only the year 2015 was taken into account. Data from the Polish Association of Allotment Gardens (PZD) had originally been aggregated for large districts, making it impossible to separate the total number and area of gardens in cities.

The statutory objectives of UAGs take into account criteria such as land use, ownership forms and accessibility rules. Documents, existing studies and reports describing the function of allotment gardens were examined, focusing on their organizational culture and management principles. Following the example of Polish UAGs, the threats to sustainable cities and their alternative urban development programs were identified. Research work and reports describing the problems of soil contamination, garden abandonment, informal housing, and limited access to the green areas of UAGs for other residents were taken into account in order to identify risks associated with:

- Decreasing biodiversity of the urban environment
- Transforming UAGs into residential areas of informal housing
- Land degradation in UAGs
- Pressure on ownership transfer and privatization of UAGs.

Slow City criteria were considered as a set of requirements and a basis for Slow City. Since May 2017, a new charter which has been in place will update the requirements list to 72 criteria, 30 of which are mandatory, 38 optional, and 4 prospective [21]. The Slow City requirements for excellence are enlisted in Attachment “C” of the Charter.

The research was carried out as of 31 December 2017.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. UAGs in Poland

Although they are present in many western European countries, UAGs are perceived as one of the (post) socialist city characteristics [22,23]. The origins of allotment agriculture can be traced back to Prussia where Daniel Gottlieb’s idea (1806–1861) initiated the urban garden system as a response to food and infrastructure shortages in early industrial cities [14]. The UAG model spread to Prussian-occupied western Poland and Russian-occupied eastern Polish territory. The year 1949 was the starting point for the development of allotment gardens in Poland when a special act devoted to ‘worker’s gardens’ was passed. The act restricted the Polish allotment gardening movement, which, from then on, complied with the state controlled labor union. Cities with over 50,000 inhabitants were obliged to establish allotments in every neighborhood where the proportion of tower block dwellers exceeded 20%. Essentially, the gardens functioned in the form of workers’ residences (often assigned to a single company) and provided access to leisure and recreational areas for the working class, often in the central areas of cities [24]. UAGs played a special role in the erstwhile socialist city, constituting an element of distinction, however, the transformation of Polish cities due to globalization has changed the expectations of the functioning of UAGs [25]. The Polish allotment gardening movement had its first step into independence in 1981 when the Workers’ Allotment Gardens Act was passed and the PZD was created. The 1981 act was unique because it brought to life a national, independent and self-governed association, breaking up with the labor union’s guardianship in a communist regime. Until the end of 2013 (when the new Family Allotment Gardens Act was established, replacing the 1981 act), every gardener was, by law, a member of the PZD. The PZD is still the largest allotment garden association and the main group of interest fighting for their rights and land protection.

The 1981 act was important for allotment gardening survival during the Polish transformation. With the introduction of the neoliberal market economy in the early 1990s, the gardens began to be perceived as attractive commercial goods and sources of fast enrichment for private, municipal, and state stakeholders [26]. In each parliamentary term, proposals to repeal the 1981 act and liquidate UAGs or at a least significantly limit the plotter’s rights were tabled. The most attractive urban gardens became the focus of interest for public and private investors. Cities and private actors faced the legal constraints that hampered the real estate market. Removal of gardens, often located in city centers, was not widespread. City authorities had to take into account the claims of garden users due to the restrictions existing in the 1981 act (e.g., compensation for landowners, allocation of replacement land).

However, in the following years, the pressure of privatization increased and legal protection of UAGs began to weaken with further changes in law and political pressure on the Polish association of allotment gardeners. In Poland, as in other post-socialist countries, the systemic transformation had changed the structures of the state and local authority [27]. During the initial stages (i.e., in the 1990s), economic development within the city was at the center of urban politics. UAGs, located in attractive areas for investment, were of interest for city authorities who wanted to allocate the land for profitable sale or investments [28]. Over time, however, urban development policies have started to shift toward the use of resources other than land, with reference to the environment, culture, social capital, innovation, and lifestyle [29]. However, this change did not include allotment gardens and urban development policies continue to make little use of their social, spatial, and environmental resources.

Ninety percent of allotment gardens in Poland are located in urban areas [30]. However, in the five largest (by total area) Polish cities (Warszawa, Kraków, Szczecin, Łódź, and Wrocław), the share of gardens is less than 5% (Table 1). Over the last few years, the number of allotment gardens in Poland has been slightly decreasing, from 4948 in 2010 to 4636 in 2017. Also, the number of garden parcels has been slowly decreasing (there was a decrease of almost 30,000 in the period 2014–2017). However, the total number of parcels was estimated at 911,182 with a total area of 319,619 hectares in 2017 (Table 2) [31].

Table 1. Urban allotment gardens (UAGs) and other green spaces in the five largest Polish cities (by percent of total urban area) in 2015.

	Total Urban Area*	Urban Parks, Green Belts, Lawns	Forest Lands	UAGs
Warszawa	51,724	3037 (5.9%)	8104 (15.7%)	1360 (2.6%)
Kraków	32,685	1592 (4.9%)	1431 (4.4%)	650 (2.0%)
Szczecin	30,055	487 (1.6%)	2591 (8.6%)	1195 (4.0%)
Łódź	29,325	1610 (5.5%)	2378 (8.1%)	718 (2.4%)
Wrocław	29,282	1448 (4.9%)	2227 (7.6%)	1340 (4.6%)

In hectares. Source: Own calculations based on data from the Central Statistical Office and data provided by the city municipal offices.

Table 2. Family allotment gardens (ROD) in Poland. Total number and area during the years 2014–2017.

		Family Allotment Gardens (ROD)			
	Year	2014	2015	2016	2017
Gardens	Number	4846	4695	4667	4636
	Area (ha)	423,968	409,887	408,630	405,569
Plots	Number	945,883	906,887	917,445	911,182
	Area (ha)	333,219	321,114	321,812	319,619

Source: Own calculations based on data from the Central Statistical Office.

3.2. Discussing UAGs as Urban Enclaves

Slow City can be perceived as a quality brand for small communities, an alternative idea, and general ethos of urban development of small cities or a part of the slow movement. To be a branded Slow City, the candidate city should possess certain characteristics and be approved by the certification commission. The underlying principles of the Slow City movement were set in the form of 55 criteria, grouped into six categories, required to be met by small cities aspiring to have the title of Slow City [9]. Table 3 summarizes seven areas with those requirements that play a key role in developing a code of conduct for local governance. They are categorized as: (1) Energy and environmental policy, (2) infrastructure policies, (3) quality of urban life policies, (4) agricultural, touristic and artisan policies, (5) policies for hospitality, awareness and training, (6) social cohesion, and (7) partnerships. In fact, membership of the Slow City movement is restricted to places with

a population of under 50,000 residents. Apart from Slow City being a formal brand, the concept is a part of a wider Slow movement that advocates a cultural shift toward slowing down in every domain of life and is not organized or controlled by a single organization. In the latter context, Table 2 presents a version of the Slow City criteria adapted to UAG development. We use Slow City criteria as a basis for the requirements of Slow City ethos. Because of insufficient legal form and a different scale of action, Polish UAGs are not a part of the Slow City movement. However, due to the statutory aims, culture and governance rules of UAGs, they are largely coherent with formal Cittaslow agenda. If we ignore the Slow City requirements that relate to organizational principles and urban policies, such as public nutrition, delimitation of space for the sale of local products, urban cabling investments etc., we are left with criteria that can be compared with UAGs. It turns out that the vast majority of the criteria in the energy and environmental policy, the infrastructure policy and the quality of urban life policies are met by UAGs. However, it should be noted that they fulfill the criteria in their own way adapted to the scale and possibilities of action. It should be noted that the plots of land are not permanent dwellings, but rather seasonal recreation areas that provide respite from the urban pace of life. On the basis of Table 3 it can be concluded that at least the UAGs operating within the PZD are Slow City enclaves in cities that do not qualify for the official title.

Due to similarities as shown by the above comparison (see Table 3), UAGs in Poland have been viewed as exclusive urban enclaves that have had a unique contribution to urban spaces that strongly correspond with the Slow City agenda. Not only in Poland but also in Europe, UAGs are frequently perceived as "third spaces" [33] due to the deficient spatial and social relationships between public and private, urban and rural, productive and recreational, and conservative and progressive areas [34]. The idea of Slow City finds its fulfillment in UAG enclaves on a micro scale as they are perceived as a hybrid phenomenon that combines the features of a traditional craft and agriculture community with a modern trend of slowing down neoliberal growth, with no equivalent to what is offered by the city in a common way. UAGs are perceived as an alternative domestic, sustainable food supply system with strong commitment to social justice and urban agrarianism, in contrast to large supermarket complexes and their conventional, mass-scale food supply chain. In view of these concerns, this article interprets UAGs in terms of enclave urbanism [35] as they are a result of the functional integration of work units, different from the larger urban space and because of activities (growing good quality and low cost crops, providing a year-round healthy lifestyle in the city etc.), and social practices (UAGs as community gardens) that meet the requirements of Slow City criteria (see Table 3).

Despite the ecological, economic, health, and social benefits, the future of UAGs is insecure, mainly due to the lack of effective control of garden management and an incoherent mission to preserve the value of allotment gardens in urban policies. The key threats are the following: (1) Threats to biodiversity and the urban environment resulting from environmental pressure on UAG areas and insufficient control over the use of gardens, (2) transformation of UAGs into residential areas with informal housing as a result of inefficient housing policy and inadequate regulations for recreational settlement construction within UAGs, (3) land degradation of gardens, linked to the diversification of allotment infrastructure and the aging of garden users, and (4) pressure on ownership transformation, and privatization resulting from the neoliberalization of cities and insufficient support for urban horticulture. These risks are discussed in detail below.

Table 3. Urban allotment gardens (UAGs) in Poland and Slow City criteria.

Requirements for Meeting Slow City Criteria		UAGs in Poland
Energy and environmental policy		
OBLIGATORY	Air quality conservation	In 2015, due to the ‘anti-smog’ law in Poland, the Polish Allotment Gardens Federation (PZD) agreed to introduce a complete ban on burning green waste and open smoking fires in UAGs. At the same time, PZD underlines that UAGs are lowering the air pollution in Polish cities.
	Water quality conservation	Usually, UAGs are equipped with individual water meters and home-made rainwater recovery containers. The PZD statute imposes the obligation to save water.
	Urban solid separate waste collection	Since 2013, due to new rules of waste collection in Poland, UAGs are obligated to pay a fee to a municipal company for waste collection. The charge rate depends on the UAG’s declaration of the degree of segregation.
	Purification of sewage disposal	According to the PZD statute, freestanding toilets are forbidden. Every UAG should make available shared toilets connected to the sewage network. Alternatively, plotters construct tight septic tanks with a closed drain and dispose sewage as compost. Some plotters pay duty to have them emptied by a specialist company.
	Reduction of public light pollution	UAGs usually do not have a developed lighting network and lighting is limited to spotlights. In autumn and winter, lighting is kept to a minimum.
OPTIONAL	Industrial & domestic disposal	According to the PZD statute, every UAG should be equipped with a composter and tight tanks for liquid composting and fertilizer production.
	Conservation of biodiversity	The prevalence of insecticides, herbicides, and lawn mowing causes a decline in invertebrates, amphibians, and nesting birds that once plowed the gardens. Fences or hedges limits the access of bigger animals to green enclaves. On the other hand, UAGs are a preserve for old varieties of trees and bushes that make them gene banks.
	Reduction of visual pollution, traffic noise	UAGs have very strict car entry rules, limited to select days and hours. The permission to use a car in the UAG area should be obtained from the UAG board.
	Energy savings and renewable sources	Plotters do not lag behind in progress and have adopted new ecologically friendly methods of obtaining electricity. Photovoltaic panels are becoming more and more popular among younger generations. In autumn and winter, electricity is disabled in UAGs.
Infrastructure policies		
OBLIGATORY	Urban cycle paths and bicycle parking	UAG roads and avenues do not have a dedicated lane for bicycles though they are a popular mode of transportation. UAG community centers usually have bicycle stands.
	Removal of architectural barriers	UAGs are trying to remove architectural barriers for disabled people by providing permanent car access to the UAG area. UAGs have ground floor infrastructure due to building conditions and municipal limitations. Use of closed-circuit television and instant monitoring has changed the plotter’s attitude to fences and hedges. However, funds provided by the EU to support the removal of architectural barriers were not extensively used by UAGs.

Table 3. Cont.

Requirements for Meeting Slow City Criteria		UAGs in Poland
OBLIGATORY	Initiatives for family life and social cohesion	According to the PZD statute, local boards are obliged to organize events like Plotter's Day, Children's Day, gardening training, lessons for children etc., to integrate the UAG community. Events are organized in the UAG common room or playground. The UAG board should lead a promotional campaign dedicated to the local community and neighbors with open days, gardening shows and family picnics. They also support integration of the youth, the elderly, the disabled and the socially excluded groups. They cooperate with local authorities, social care services, schools, and universities.
	Quality of urban life policies	
	Planning for urban resilience	PZD and local UAGs often get drawn into public disputes on environmental policies, sustainable development, municipal land-use plans, and urban development. Every initiative that can have a potentially negative influence on UAGs is contested with the strong support of the UAG community.
	Social green areas with productive plants and/or fruit trees	Local boards of UAGs are obliged to ensure community control over how gardens are used. Every UAG should be farmed according to the local or PZD statute that strictly regulates esthetic, cultivation, and recreational rules.
OBLIGATORY	Requalification and reuse of marginal areas	In the past, UAGs were planned in urban wastelands that were often localized in former military areas, industrial fields, and magazines. With plotters, it was possible to restore these areas to citizens.
	Other policies (awareness and agricultural)	
	Development of agro-ecology and use of local products	Gardens are a source of healthy, GMO-free vegetables and fruits for domestic consumption or small retail sales. Crops are also shared among family members and friends. With increase in experience in the cultivation of crops, plotters pay more attention to natural fertilizers, compost, manure, own seeds, knits to cover the plantings, and to limit chemical sprays in favor of natural solutions.
	Protection of working techniques and traditional crafts	Most of the UAG gardeners have passed an introductory course in the basics of cultivation and management of their own UAGs. However, a large number of younger plotters, who have bought or inherited UAGs, have imbibed knowledge and skills from parents and/or grandparents, books, or internet sources. There is also well functioning community support and older plotters share their good practices with the less experienced.
OBLIGATORY	Adoption of active techniques suitable for launching bottom-up processes	In some cases, the more experienced allotment gardeners organize demonstrations or study visits to their plots. Local boards encourage people with unique knowledge and skills to share them with community members and local neighbors. UAGs also cooperate with agricultural faculties and universities.

Source: Adapted from Attachment "C" of the Cittaslow International Charter (2017), Statute of PZD (2015), Statements of National Council of PZD available at pzd.pl [32].

3.3. Threats to Biodiversity and the Urban Environment

The negative impact of UAGs on the urban environment is mostly due to user activity and some external factors, such as heavy street traffic. User practices which may be considered as threatening to Slow City enclaves include: (1) Transformation of UAGs into recreational sites which changes the

composition of flora and plant diversity. A study of Polish UAGs shows that the share of ornamental plant species is higher than that of edible plants [34]. The transformation of UAGs from vegetable cultivating lands into recreation sites increases the demand for ornamental plants and consequently reduces rare or endangered species (the most notable example being *Thuja occidentalis*, popular among garden users). (2) A large number of cats fed by garden users reduce the number of birds and disrupt the biological system [36]. The number of house sparrows in Warsaw UAGs has decreased by 95% in the last 50 years [37]. (3) Excessive use of fertilizers and the burning of grass, which is a threat to biodiversity and, additionally, increases air pollution in a degraded environment [38].

The risk of harm to UAG users is present in gardens established in highly industrial areas or ones previously used as sites for waste disposal [39] with high concentrations of heavy metals in the soil [40–42]. In some cases, gardens were established in wetlands or other areas unsuitable for residential housing and in the case of large cities, a significant part of the gardens was located along railway lines and major transport arteries. Those areas were, and still are, not attractive for housing and commercial use due to noise and pollution [43].

3.4. Transforming UAGs into Residential Areas of Informal Housing

The problem of informal housing also occurs in countries with a stable economy [44,45] where ‘informal’ usually means ‘provided without the necessary legal permits’ or without the formal construction procedures. Hence, regardless of the construction materials used, the essence of informal housing is its illegality. According to Polish law, houses or arbors larger than 25 square meters are not allowed in UAGs. There are tens of thousands of people living permanently in Polish UAGs [46]. In Poznań alone there are 4000 permanent urban garden inhabitants. We classify informal housing in Polish UAGs into the following categories: (1) ‘Rich’ informal housing (gardens illegally transformed into residences with people living there permanently), (2) ‘poor’ informal housing (UAGs used by homeless people as dwelling places in winter and by people who move to gardens because of their need to reduce rental costs). Both forms of informal settlements result from a lack of affordable housing, lack of social housing, and the lack of proper supervision of municipalities and garden management bodies. Informal housing in UAG areas is associated with infrastructure disadvantages (lack of sewage, electricity, and water supply in the winter months).

The garden association may terminate the lease agreement if the user uses a land parcel in a manner inconsistent with its aim, statute, or regulation. As an optional solution to this, the association may or may not terminate the contract because of its use as a permanent residence. However, termination of contracts is usually ineffective. In 2016 there were only a few evictions in the whole country [47].

3.5. Land Degradation

One survey from the capital of the Czech Republic indicated that only 45% of gardens were used for gardening and one day recreation, while 29% were disused and another 14.7% were used as a second home or residential dwelling (9.5%) [48]. This problem also occurs in Poland, although on a smaller scale. A survey financed by the PZD shows that 21.2% of the gardens are used exclusively for recreational purposes (excluding fruit and vegetable crops). In her study of Poznań, Dominika Dymek [49] refers to the problem of poor sanitary conditions of ‘artificially’ used gardens. In 1211 garden parcels, Dymek identified 37 abandoned plots and 187 degraded plots.

Most of the users are elderly people (over 60) [50] and the aging of the gardener population increases the ratio of abandoned gardens. The disuse of allotment gardens increases the risk of crime and causes esthetic degradation, but primarily decreases the quality of the biological environment. As van der Berg and Winsum Westra [51] noticed, an appreciation of urban gardens is influenced by their design style. The informality of allotment garden houses and their esthetic appearance is, in many cases, disputable with the abandoned parcels or poor garden arrangements [52].

3.6. Pressure on Ownership Transformation and Privatization

The real estate market demonstrates that people are willing to pay more for property located close to parks or other green spaces than for a house that does not offer this amenity [53]. Further, some types of green spaces in cities are more desirable than others as places to live nearby. For example, large flat open spaces which are used publicly are much less preferred than natural areas containing woods, hills or ponds [54]. Additional factors that have an impact on land value are traffic congestion, street parking, litter, loud outdoor events, playgrounds, and ballfields, or undesirable groups congregating in green open spaces, engaging in morally offensive activities. In this context, the proximate presence of UAGs is likely to be regarded differently in relation to property status. Residents living near gardens perceive an important advantage of localization if they are leaseholders or plot users. If residents are not allotment gardeners themselves, the advantages of proximity to such green spaces may have both good and bad sides. UAGs in Poland are usually inaccessible for non-users due to surrounding fences or hedges. Additionally, UAGs may generate a nasty smell of manure or disturbing smoke from fires and grills. Nevertheless, residences located close to urban green spaces such as UAGs frequently sell as premium housing locations [55]. UAGs are also a tempting target for investors, real estate agents, developers, and public authorities. As UAGs are usually established on publicly owned land in the form of perpetual lease for garden associations, they are an ‘easy solution’ for urban sprawl and a demand in growth caused by new housing projects, motor highways, shopping centers, or public projects [56]. The exclusion of non-owners of UAGs has spurred a public debate to limit exclusive rights to green urban spaces and change them into some kind of public-access community (PAC) gardens [57]. PAC gardens are located on publicly owned land, open to anyone at all times, collectively managed by various groups, and without or with less formal membership constraints. In this respect, UAGs should become a shared natural environment and urban public spaces with no exclusions [58]. The new development trends for UAGs are perceived as a threat to law entitlements and privileges won and maintained so far. Any concession by the PZD can lead to the adoption of laws that will have adverse effects on guaranteed protections and obstacles in UAG trading. The large majority of Polish UAG users perceive that PZD is the only organization capable of ensuring protection to gardens and preventing them from becoming prey to investors.

4. Conclusions

In the search for sustainable and alternative development frameworks, new approaches are discussed, referring among others, to the use of urban green spaces. Even more stable institutions, such as UAGs remain unstable, or, at least, create enclaves of sustainable development. The gardens are a preserve of green space, improving the quality of urban air, contributing to the preservation of fauna species, etc., however, their impact may be overestimated. We argue that allotment gardens located inside cities can be perceived as a lens that concentrates a beam of sustainable urban development at one point and reflects alternative urban development frameworks, especially the Slow City concept. We agree that UAGs are valuable sites with many social, ecological and cultural functions, but that their role in the urban ecosystem may be overvalued in that sense. The social image of urban gardening is largely idealized. There are problems of soil pollution, limitation of the garden function due to its degradation, informal housing, the disappearance of biodiversity, limitation of access to green areas for other inhabitants and these tendencies are reinforced by the pressure to reduce the number of UAGs. This is also confirmed by other studies indicating the need to protect existing regulations concerning public green areas and allotment gardens in Poland and other ex-socialist countries [59,60].

The aging of UAG users is the most serious problem, as it means weakening of the social influence that can oppose the monetization of urban space and its use for recreation [61]. The lack of urban policies addressing aging in Polish cities is particularly important here, because the process of adapting space and infrastructure to the needs of older people has only just begun [62], and the development of projects related to counteracting social isolation and loneliness of older people in cities should be assessed as insufficient.

Recent studies show that in Poland, we are experiencing neoliberal regulatory experiments and hyper-growth policies of urban growth [63–65], leading to fragmentation, shrinking and/or privatization of public spaces, including reduction in social services, educational infrastructures, social spaces, etc. In response, urban gardening has become a Slow City enclave, offering green areas on a rental basis, rather than property rights. UAG users are (still) at risk of privatization and they tend to mobilize in order to defend their interests. With increasing demand for transforming UAGs into semi-public open spaces [59], the possible future of Polish UAGs is not re-urbanization but rather the sharing of some of their space with other inhabitants.

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