الجمهورية الجزائرية الديمقراطية الشعبية

وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي

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**DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY**

**N°……. /SNV/2026**

## MASTER'S THESIS

Presented by

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**Field: Ecology and environment**
**Specialization: Ecology and environment**

**TOPIC**

# *Aquaponics as a Sustainable Food production System*

**Publicly defended on 28/ 06/2026**

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**Academic year: 2026/2027**

# Abstract

Aquaponics is an integrated agricultural system combining fish farming with soilless plant cultivation in a recirculating aquatic environment where fish, plants, and beneficial microorganisms interact symbiotically. Fish waste is converted by nitrifying bacteria into nitrates that plants absorb as nutrients, while plants purify the water before it returns to the fish tanks. This document provides a comprehensive overview covering system components (fish tanks, biofilters, grow beds, water circulation, aeration), biological processes (nitrogen cycle, nitrification), sustainability dimensions, economic and social aspects, challenges, and future perspectives. Aquaponics offers significant environmental advantages over conventional agriculture, including 80–90% water savings, elimination of chemical fertilizers, reduced pesticide use, and lower carbon emissions. Economically, it generates dual revenue from fish and vegetable production. Socially, it enhances food security, provides education, creates employment, and supports community development. However, challenges include high initial costs, technical complexity, energy dependence, nutrient imbalances, disease management, and need for specialized expertise. The Netherlands is presented as a leading case study. Future prospects include decoupled systems, smart sensors, IoT, robotics, and circular economy integration. Aquaponics represents a promising sustainable food production technology for water-scarce and urban regions.

**Keywords:** Aquaponics, Aquaculture, Hydroponics, Sustainability, Nitrogen cycle, Nitrification, Biofiltration, Water efficiency, Food security, Urban agriculture

**الملخص**

**الزراعة المائية المتكاملة نظام يجمع بين تربية الأسماك والزراعة المائية في بيئة مائية معاد تدويرها، حيث تحول البكتيريا نفايات الأسماك إلى نترات تمتصها النباتات، بينما تنقي النباتات المياه قبل عودتها إلى خزانات الأسماك. يغطي هذا المستند مكونات النظام (خزانات الأسماك، المرشحات الحيوية، أحواض النمو، دوران المياه، التهوية)، والعمليات البيولوجية (دورة النيتروجين)، والاستدامة، والجوانب الاقتصادية والاجتماعية، والتحديات، والآفاق المستقبلية. تفوق الزراعة المائية المتكاملة الزراعة التقليدية بتوفير المياه بنسبة 80-90٪، والاستغناء عن الأسمدة الكيماوية، وتقليل المبيدات، وخفض انبعاثات الكربون. اقتصادياً، توفر مصدرين للدخل من الأسماك والخضروات. اجتماعياً، تعزز الأمن الغذائي، وتوفر التعليم، وتخلق فرص العمل. تشمل التحديات ارتفاع التكاليف، والتعقيد التقني، والاعتماد على الطاقة، واحتياج الخبرة المتخصصة. هولندا نموذج رائد. الآفاق المستقبلية تشمل الأنظمة المنفصلة، والاستشعار الذكي، وإنترنت الأشياء، والاقتصاد الدائري.**

**الكلمات المفتاحية: زراعة مائية متكاملة، تربية أسماك، زراعة مائية، استدامة، دورة نيتروجين، نترتة، ترشيح حيوي، كفاءة مياه، أمن غذائي، زراعة حضرية.**

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# *Introduction*

# Introduction

The global food system faces unprecedented challenges in the twenty-first century. Population growth, urbanization, water scarcity, land degradation, climate change, and environmental pollution place increasing pressure on conventional agricultural production methods **(FAO, 2014; Goddek et *al*., 2015; Somerville et *al*., 2014).** Traditional soil-based agriculture, while essential for global food supply, consumes approximately 70% of the world's freshwater resources and contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, nutrient pollution, and biodiversity loss **(FAO, 2014; Goddek et *al*., 2019; Tyson et *al*., 2011).** In this context, the development of innovative, resource-efficient, and sustainable food production systems has become a critical priority for researchers, policymakers, and agricultural producers worldwide **(Goddek et *al*., 2015; Rakocy et *al*., 2006; Somerville et *al*., 2014).**

Aquaponics is a sophisticated, integrated food production system that combines aquaculture (fish farming) with hydroponics (soilless plant cultivation) within a recirculating aquatic environment **(Rakocy et al., 2006; Somerville et *al*., 2014).** This bio-integrated approach leverages the complementary relationship between fish, plants, and beneficial microorganisms to create a closed-loop ecosystem where waste products from one biological component serve as essential nutrients for another **(Goddek et *al*., 2015; Rakocy et al., 2006; Tyson et *al*., 2011).** In aquaponic systems, nutrient-rich effluent from fish tanks is used to fertilize hydroponic plant beds. Plant roots and associated rhizobacteria remove these nutrients from the water, simultaneously purifying it before recirculation back to the fish tanks. This natural filtration process eliminates the need for synthetic fertilizers and significantly reduces water consumption compared to conventional agriculture **(FAO, 2014; Goddek et *al*., 2019; Somerville et *al*., 2014).**

The fundamental principle underlying aquaponics is the microbial transformation of nitrogen compounds. Fish excrete ammonia as a metabolic waste product, which is highly toxic to aquatic organisms at elevated concentrations. Nitrifying bacteria, particularly *Nitrosomonas* and *Nitrobacter* species, colonize biofilters and plant root surfaces within the system, where they convert ammonia first into nitrite and subsequently into nitrate **(Goddek et *al*., 2015; Rakocy et *al*., 2006; Somerville et *al*., 2014).** Nitrate serves as a readily available nutrient for plants, which absorb it through their root systems for protein synthesis, chlorophyll formation, and overall growth. Through this biological process, aquaponics mimics natural ecosystems, transforming potential pollutants into productive resources while maintaining water quality suitable for fish survival **(FAO, 2014; Tyson et *al*., 2011).**

The environmental and economic advantages of aquaponics have attracted growing global attention. Studies indicate that aquaponic systems can reduce water consumption by 80–90% compared with conventional soil-based agriculture, making them particularly valuable in arid and semi-arid regions facing freshwater scarcity **(Love et *al*., 2014; Somerville et *al*., 2014).**

Furthermore, aquaponics eliminates the need for chemical fertilizers and minimizes pesticide use, thereby reducing environmental pollution and producing food that aligns with consumer demand for organic and sustainably grown products **(Goddek et *al*., 2019; Rakocy et *al*., 2006).** The simultaneous production of fish and vegetables diversifies income sources for farmers and improves the economic resilience of agricultural enterprises **(Love et *al*., 2014; Tyson et *al*., 2011).**

Several types of aquaponic systems have been developed to suit different production scales, crop types, and management objectives. Media-based systems use inert substrates such as gravel or expanded clay to support plant growth and provide surface area for bacterial colonization. Nutrient Film Technique (NFT) systems circulate a thin layer of nutrient-rich water through narrow channels containing plant roots. Deep Water Culture (DWC) systems, also known as floating raft systems, suspend plants on floating platforms with their roots submerged in oxygenated nutrient-rich water **(Rakocy et *al*., 2006; Somerville et *al*., 2014).** Each configuration offers specific advantages and limitations depending on the intended application, from small-scale hobby systems to large commercial production facilities **(Goddek et *al*., 2015; Tyson et al., 2011).**

Despite its significant potential, aquaponics faces several challenges that limit widespread adoption. High initial investment costs for infrastructure, equipment, and monitoring technologies represent a major barrier, particularly for small-scale farmers in developing countries **(Goddek et *al*., 2019; Love et *al*., 2014).** The complexity of maintaining biological balance among fish, plants, and microorganisms requires multidisciplinary technical expertise in aquaculture, hydroponics, water chemistry, and microbiology **(Goddek et *al*., 2015; Tyson et *al*., 2011).** Energy dependence for pumps, aeration systems, and climate control can reduce environmental and economic sustainability, especially in regions with high electricity costs or unreliable energy infrastructure **(FAO, 2014; Somerville et *al*., 2014).**

The scientific literature on aquaponics has expanded considerably over the past two decades. Foundational publications by **(Rakocy et *al*., 2006)** established technical guidelines for system design and operation, while **(Somerville et *al*., 2014)** provided comprehensive practical guidance for small-scale implementation **(FAO, 2014; Rakocy et *al*., 2006; Somerville et *al*., 2014). (Goddek et *al*.,2015)** synthesized current knowledge on aquaponic food production systems, addressing technological, environmental, socioeconomic, and regulatory dimensions **(Goddek et *al*., 2015; Goddek et *al*., 2019).** Recent research has explored decoupled multiloop systems, automation technologies, renewable energy integration, and nutrient management strategies to improve system efficiency and economic viability **(Love et *al*., 2014; Tyson et *al*., 2011).**

This document aims to provide a comprehensive overview of aquaponic systems, encompassing fundamental principles, system components, biological processes, sustainability

dimensions, economic and social aspects, challenges and limitations, and future perspectives. Drawing upon peer-reviewed scientific literature, technical manuals, and case studies from leading research institutions worldwide, this synthesis is intended to serve as a resource for students, researchers, agricultural professionals, and policymakers interested in understanding and advancing aquaponic technology as a sustainable solution for future food production **(FAO, 2014; Goddek et *al.*, 2015; Goddek et *al.*, 2019; Love et *al.*, 2014; Rakocy et *al.*, 2006; Somerville et *al.*, 2014; Tyson et *al.*, 2011).**

The document is organized into ten chapters addressing key aspects of aquaponics: basic principles (Chapter I), system components (Chapter II), aquaculture management (Chapter III), hydroponic production (Chapter IV), microbial ecology (Chapter V), system design history and types (Chapter VI), sustainability and environmental impact (Chapter VII), economic and social aspects (Chapter VIII), challenges and limitations (Chapter IX), and a country case study from the Netherlands (Chapter X).