Priority 1: Engaging Diverse Communities Through Community Gardening - Rebecca Ellis

Community gardening, generally considered part of the non-profit urban agriculture movement, has grown steadily in North American cities and in some rural areas, particularly in the last two decades. While community garden projects have the potential to be transformative, providing multiple important benefits to individuals, neighbourhoods, and cities (Levkoe 2010); critics have pointed out the complicated, contradictory, and sometimes destructive role they can play in relation to broader structures of injustice and oppression (Pudup 2010; McIvor and Hale 2015).

Nevertheless, community gardens have the potential to bring greater social justice and inclusion to urban neighbourhoods. In this paper, I will explore the ways in which community gardens can best meet the needs of a diversity of people in the neighbourhoods in which they are situated. In particular, I will look at the best practices from four community garden initiatives that meaningfully engage and involve members of marginalized and/or vulnerable communities including racialized people, newly arrived immigrant and refugees, and/or people who are living in poverty. Part 1 examines the importance of community gardening in North America. Part 2 examines the challenges and barriers experienced by marginalized and/or vulnerable communities in community garden projects. Part 3 examines projects that have been successful at integrating vulnerable and/or marginalized communities. Part 4 proposes strategies to increase diversity in community garden projects in Ontario.

Part 1: The importance of community gardens

Since the 1970s, the amount of and interest in community garden projects in North American cities has grown exponentially. Although there is some debate in the urban agriculture literature about the definition of community gardening, this paper will focus on both communal and allotment community gardens that are either not for profit or social enterprises and will include a range of organizational types from informal and grassroots to formal and managed by city governments, social institutions, and/or NGOs.

The benefits of community gardens are widespread and diverse including increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables; providing people with practical gardening skills; promoting a sense of individual wellbeing and health; building community ties and social capital; connecting people to the cycles of the earth; regenerating vacant, neglected, or disturbed urban landscapes; promoting

cross-cultural communication; and encouraging people to develop critiques of the global food system (Levkoe 2006; Lawson 2005; Ellis 2010; Miedema et al 2013).

Community garden projects have a unique contribution to make to the urban landscape. In discussing the movement to save hundreds of community gardens in New York City in the 1990s, Staeheli and Mitchell (2008) argue that the movement, "claimed a right to space in the city in which a public …could be formed, mobilized and empowered" (p. 105). They represent the potential of what Galt et al (2014) call 'actually existing alternatives' to the conventional food system as well as to some of the problems associated with modern urban living.

Part 2: Challenges and barriers to diversity

Although community gardening offers many well-documented benefits to individuals, neighbourhoods, and cities, potential challenges and barriers have been identified by participants and researchers. Community gardens do not always reflect the diversity of the cities or neighbourhoods in which they are situated. Even with the best of intentions, community gardens can be exclusive spaces in which marginalized people do not feel comfortable participating or do not participate in the numbers anticipated by garden coordinators. Community gardens have also been implicated in the process of urban gentrification and dislocation (Aptekar 2015; Passidomo 2014; Staeheli et al 2002).

Some researchers argue that NGOS or city staff that often manage community gardens adopt an "individualistic, consumption-oriented framework that cannot adequately challenge the dominance of industrial agriculture or achieve food or social justice" (McIvor and Hale 2015, p. 731). An individualistic approach can particularly be seen in community gardens based on allotment plots instead of collectively cultivated gardens. This framework can be problematic because it takes, "the access and purchasing power of the predominantly white, middle-class consumer for granted" and it "ignores the ways working-class and people of color have historically brought about social change" (Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2012, p. 85). An individualist framework may keep some projects from addressing the deeper structural issues that have led marginalized people to be interested in participating in community gardening. On the other hand, a collective framework may be subject to problems such as lack of democratic decision-making, interpersonal disputes, and disagreement about structure, design, roles, and resources.

Projects aimed at marginalized people and communities (especially low-income and racialized), are sometimes not led or coordinated by members of the communities in which they operate (Bradley and Herrera, 2016). This can lead to residents of the neighbourhood feeling a lack of belonging or attachment to the garden; or even worse, identifying it as a source of gentrification (Mitchell and

Staeheli 2008). It can also lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications as the garden coordinators may not understand the needs or desires of the neighbourhood residents. As Cadieaux and Slocum argue, "the work done under the auspices of food security has often reproduced the socially inequitable conditions and relations it nominally seeks to address" (p. 4).

Grassroots projects in low-income, racialized communities are not always able to access the same funding and resources as projects located in higher income communities. For example, Bradley and Herrera (2016) point out that, "white led urban agriculture groups in New York City were able to attract more funding than people of colour led counterparts" (p. 102). There is a tension that develops when grassroots projects succeed in gaining support of larger, established NGOs or city staff; often they do not retain the right to control the direction of their projects. In some cases, NGOs or city staff may not recognize the work around food security or food justice that is already being done in the community at the grassroots. Communities are sometimes flagged as being deficient in social capital if they don't have top-down, officially-sanctioned programs and initiatives, which overlooks the ways in which poor people organize grassroots communities and systems of support. This reflects an assumption that, "real or effective action has to be initiated (or at least strongly facilitated) by officialdom" (McIvor and Hale 2015, p 730)

Although community gardens are often presented as particularly important for marginalized people living in lower income neighbourhoods, sometimes community garden projects are not located those neighbourhoods, requiring people to travel to their garden plot. Vancouver-based research found that low income gardeners lived further from established community gardens than higher income gardeners – by almost a kilometre. The same researchers also found that "gardeners born outside Canada or the US also travelled about a kilometer further than Canadians or Americans" (Lowcock, 2013, p. 21). Travel distance to community gardens - and lack of adequate transportation - can be a major barrier to gardening for residents of small or rural communities.

The role that community gardening plays in urban gentrification and displacement is a complex one. As organizers with the San Francisco Urban Agricultural Alliance argue, "Gentrification is caused by much larger social and economic forces, and it may be largely out of our hands" (San Francisco Urban Agricultural Alliance). However, they point out that community gardens and other food initiatives can "provide cover for social injustice by promoting its seemingly benign environmental agenda and ignoring concerns over displacement and lack of community control" (San Francisco Urban Agricultural Alliance). They further argue that "promoting the idea that solutions to our societal problems are based on individual action (like gardening)–not the redesign of larger political, economic, and social structures–may be tantamount to supporting the status quo" (San Francisco Urban Agricultural

Alliance). In some cities, urban gentrification and dislocation, can be seen as a continuation of colonialism, forcing urban Indigenous people out of neighbourhoods. This points to an urgent need for organizers of community garden projects to recognize that access to land is political and directly tied to the legacy and continued impact of colonialism, namely the forced removal of Indigenous people from their land.

The challenges in engaging diverse communities in community garden projects are numerous and include racism, differential access to power based on class, top-down approaches to decision-making, and lack of access to land. Regardless of the many complex reasons why some community gardens do not reflect the diversity of the neighbourhoods or cities in which they are located, research indicates that change can come through intentional actions from garden designers and project coordinators. In fact, it seems very important for anyone creating or facilitating a community garden project to be very deliberate in creating gardens that are accessible, inclusive, and diverse. As researchers in Vancouver found "unless there is intent behind building inclusion, bridging soft and technical barriers, and providing programming around culture, new immigrants, seniors, and those with accessibility challenges are unlikely to participate fully in community gardens" (Lowcock, 2013, p. 25)

Part 3: Case studies and best practices

Case Study #1: H.O.P.E and Milky Way Garden – Toronto, ON

Both the HOPE and the Milky Way gardens are located in Parkdale, a neighbourhood in central, west Toronto and are managed, either fully or partially by the non-profit Greenest City.

H.O.P.E Garden

The HOPE garden was established in 2006 in Dunn Park, a small park nestled beside the Masryk-Cowan community centre and across the street from the Parkdale Public Library. Although the HOPE garden is a project of Greenest City, who employs staff to help run programming, the day to day running of the garden is managed by a steering committee made up of gardeners. Decision about topics such as whether to lock the garden gate are made democratically by the steering committee (Ellis, 2010).

The HOPE garden is made up of a combination of individual plots, organization plots, and communal plots. The organizations that have garden plots are social service agencies that operate within Parkdale. Plots in the garden are free, but there is a long waiting list (Greenest City).

The HOPE garden is the site of weekly working bees, in which gardeners exchange ideas, assist each other, and garden in the communal areas (Ellis, 2010). There are also regular events including monthly potlucks and an end of year harvest celebration. Workshops are held regularly about various

topics that interest the gardeners. Outside experts or Greenest City staff sometimes lead the workshops; others are led by the gardeners themselves. While conducting research in the HOPE garden in the summer of 2009, I found that Greenest City staff intentionally sought out gardeners to be on the steering committee, attend events, and lead workshops (Ellis 2010).

The participatory democratic structure, the communal garden spaces, and the regular events, workshops, and field trips, helped to create a sense of attachment and belonging in the HOPE garden and to create a community garden that, in many ways, not only reflects the neighbourhood but gives space for people often pushed out during the process of gentrification.

The Milky Way Garden

The Milky Way Garden is located in a former alleyway behind the Parkdale Public Library. Initially established on privately-owned land, with permission of the owners, this garden is now the first property owned by the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (acquired in 2016), a partner of Greenest City (Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust).

The Milky Way garden was established as a temporary garden in 2007 by an ESL class made up of mainly Tibetan refugees; the students and alumni of which continue to be the main gardeners. The garden has strong community support; in 2013 when the soil was found to be contaminated, the community helped to build 12 raised beds so gardeners could continue to grow food (Greenest City).

In addition to the long-term gardeners, the Milky Way Garden will be a demonstration site for various urban agriculture techniques, included soil remediation. Importantly, especially with the gentrification that has been occurring in Parkdale for two decades, the Milky Way Garden is part of larger mission of the PNLT, which is to maintain and increase affordable housing for low-income people in Parkdale (Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust).

Community land trusts are a potentially crucial in establishing secure land for community gardens that are not located in public parks. As Tornaghi (2014) point out, community land trusts and other forms of urban commoning can make garden projects dependent on the wishes and needs of the participants not the whims of the real estate market.

Case Study # 2: Farmers on 57th – Vancouver, ON

The Farmers on 57th is an urban agriculture project in Vancouver that is managed by the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities. In addition to maintaining an urban farm, through which they run a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, they have therapeutic community gardens designed to be accessible and inviting to differently-abled people. The farm and gardens are located on the

grounds of the George Pearson Centre, a health facility that is home to 120 people living with disabilities (Farmers on 57th)

Farmers on 57th runs several community programs including regular, family-friendly working bees in the garden and workshops, including on how to build wheelchair accessible raised bed gardens (ibid). Additionally, they run a community garden program in a nearby public park, aimed at children and families—with priority given to children from low-income and/or immigrant and refugee families (ibid).

The therapeutic gardens include communal garden spaces for the resident of the health facility, as well as individual plots for community organizations. The gardens are wheelchair accessible with safe, wide pathways and raised beds. The garden tools provided are appropriate for people with various mobility issues (ibid).

Case Study # 3 – La Finca del Sur – the Bronx, NYC

La Finca del Sur is a community garden project located in the Bronx in New York City that was created and is led by women of colour living in the neighbourhood in which the garden is located. The project is managed by a board of directors – made up mostly of Black or Latina women who reside in the neighbourhood -- and worked collectively by members and volunteers (La Finca del Sur).

La Finca del Sur operates as an outdoor community centre, hosting garden-related workshops and weekly working bees. The garden is also the site of community events that are not directly garden related but are aimed at empowering women and youth of colour living in the neighbourhood (Thomas 2017). The La Finca del Sur board of directors is explicitly interested in not only addressing food insecurity and injustice in their neighbourhood but in linking these issues to global inequality and systemic systems of oppression. As Finca gardener Frances A. Perez-Rodriguez describes, the garden, "honors black woman and woman of color in general, who are really on the frontline, but who are also marginalized and silenced in the food and farming world" (Thomas 2017).

Part 4: Strategies for diversity

There are several concrete ways in which community garden coordinators and participants can encourage diversity and inclusion. Research indicates that community gardens in which coordinators intentionally promote inclusivity are more likely to "learn about local food and agriculture; interact with, learn from, and build more relationships with people of other culture; talk more with neighbours; participate in community projects; and experience a higher quality of life" (Lowcock, 2013, 24).

Strategy 1: Meaningful consultation

Several sources highlighted the need for meaningful consultation and outreach with grassroots organizations that serve diverse communities. Meaningful consultation includes involving organizations and individuals in planning the garden—from the beginning stages, if possible—in participatory and democratic ways. This may involve community mapping—to find the best location for a new garden project—and community-led design of the garden itself. If a grassroots garden project already exists in a neighbourhood, it is important for larger NGOs or City staff to find ways to support it without taking over the project. One of the main ways to provide support is through providing secure access to land for garden projects and providing permanent and stable funds for staff and programming.

The location of community gardens should be a process that involves meaningful community consultation and a democratic, transparent process. There should also be a pro-active attempt to find locations for community gardens in neighbourhoods that are underserved by urban agriculture projects and/or green spaces (Lowcock, 2013). Likewise, community gardens should be easily accessible by foot, bike, and public transit, especially in lower-income neighbourhoods in which people may have limited access to private vehicles.

Strategy 2: Accessible information and communication

To create gardens that are culturally diverse, it is important that information and communication about community gardens be accessible. Materials about creating, planning, or participating in a community garden should be multi-lingual as well as available in multiple formats. Garden planning or community mapping sessions should include translation when possible. As noted by Lowcock (2013), recruitment for Vancouver's community gardens is often only in English and heavily leans towards the internet, which excludes people who don't speak English and/or people who do not have regular access to the internet. It is important for organizers of community gardens to know the neighbourhood in which they plan to create a garden in order to determine which forms of communication best meets the needs of residents.

Signs in the garden should be multi-lingual as well as easy to read and understand. This is especially true for signs about how to get involved in the community garden. On the outside of the fences of the HOPE garden, for example, are several signs giving basic information about the garden in a variety of languages. Outside the HOPE garden is a message board in which information about garden programs and events is posted, also in multiple languages (Ellis 2010).

Strategy 3: Accessible, welcoming garden design

Community gardens should be co-created with the communities in which they serve and the neighbourhoods in which they are located. Garden coordinators interviewed in Vancouver consistently mentioned that the design of gardens was essential to creating a welcoming space. This is especially true for differently-abled people, seniors and others with mobility issues. Wide paths, comfortable benches throughout, and the presence of some raised beds are important ways to make community garden spaces more accessible for a wide variety of people. Not only should these design features be present in every garden (not something that people have to ask or fight for) but the reason for these design features should be clearly explained to other gardeners.

For communal areas of a garden project (or community gardens that are collectively gardened) active gardener participation in planning the garden is important in reflecting the diversity of the gardeners and surrounding neighbourhood. As Eizenburg (2012) points out "each garden allows for a uniquely different experience of space with its own arrangement, aesthetic, usage, and colors. This diversity is possible because gardens are spatial expressions of a specific group that was not formally trained in urban planning or landscape architecture and does not attempt to implement principles from these disciplines" (p. 771).

It is important to note that community garden projects on publically-owned land may be required to meet accessibility requirements set out by various levels of government, some of which may be expensive or difficult for grassroots organizations to implement. While this can limit the ability for participatory garden design, it also potentially increases accessibility. There may be room to work with municipal or provincial officials to find creative ways to retain the grassroots design and participatory decision-making of a project while meeting accessibility requirements.

Strategy 4: Inclusive and engaging programming

One of the key recommendations to the City of Vancouver was that it support the creation of engaging, culturally-appropriate programming by providing funds to pay for workshops, speakers, and field trips (Lowcock, 2013). Lowcock (2013) points out that, "those working with isolated populations feel as though programming is one of the most important components for citizen engagement and inclusivity. However, garden programming was low on the list of support needs, according to coordinators" (Lowcock, 2013, p. 23)

Innovative, gardener-directed (and led) programming can help to build a strong sense of attachment to the garden and can help encourage cross-cultural communication and skill-sharing. The programming of the HOPE garden was not only popular with gardeners but popular with and *open to*

non-gardeners. This helped to create a garden project that had broad community support, outside of the group of gardeners (Ellis 2010).

La Finca del Sur regularly runs workshops that are not directly related to gardening but are aimed at empowering women of colour and/or youth. For example, a recent speaker session, held in the garden, was about Hip Hop and Gentrification in the Bronx (La Finca del Sur, FB)

Strategy 5: Community empowerment beyond gardening

Community garden projects that encourage participatory democratic decision making—such as the HOPE garden's gardener-led steering committee—can foster community empowerment that extends beyond the garden

The *experience* **of participating in democratic decision making within one's neighbourhood can be a transformative experience. Not only do people learn the practical skills necessary in democratic decision-making and community organizing, but they can begin to critically question the ways in which the socioeconomic system affects their everyday lives. Levkoe (2006), in his work on food justice projects at The Stop in Toronto, argues that "by creating collective spaces and being involved in democratic practices, participants are able to directly experience, practice, and learn democracy" (p. 95). He further states that, "realizing that they can do these activities themselves helps people take further steps toward understanding their dependence on corporations" (2006, 94). Projects like these resonate because they give people the experience of exercising democratic, collective control over their neighbourhood, and over an aspect of everyday life in which many people have little control.**

Projects such as the Milky Way Garden, in which the aim of the project is to promote urban agriculture while also pushing back against gentrification, can be especially powerful in this regard. It can be very important that community garden projects also address issues of poverty, lack of affordable housing, and environmental racism – all of which are often intimately connected to food insecurity in urban neighbourhoods. Community garden projects such as the HOPE garden and La Finca del Sur can become grassroots, outdoor community centre for their neighbourhood. They can be spaces in which people meet, discuss, share, and learn – even if they are not directly involved in the garden projects.

Strategy 6: Encouraging attachment to place

In neighbourhoods undergoing transition or dislocation, a community garden can be a space of gathering and belonging. An important aspect in encouraging people to start and to continue gardening is to promote an attachment to place. As Turner points out "we know and experience the world through our bodies" (Turner, 2001, 510). Gardeners become attached to their gardens so it is important that

community gardens are located on secure and in relatively permanent locations. Likewise, in allotment plot community gardens gardeners become very attached to their plot. The nurturing of healthy soil, for example, is an ongoing process. Turner found that the community gardeners she interviewed "identified the soil as an active participant in the growing process" (Turner, 2001, 515)

The establishment of a community gardens as temporary or the re-assigning of garden plots every year disaffirms a sense of community belonging and attachment. It can also lead to a high dropout rate among participants because "an embodied connection to place" is often what keeps people active in community gardens (Turner, 2011, 514).

This can be especially important for people who are newly arrived immigrants and refugees and people at risk of social dislocation due to gentrification. They may grow plants, including perennials, and engage in gardening practices that are deeply meaningful to them. Eizenburg (2011) argues that "the lived facet of the space of community gardens has multiple expressions in images, memories, emotions, identity, and everyday practice" (p. 770). To be able to return to and nurture the same plot, year after year may increase a sense of belonging and attachment to their neighbourhood.

Conclusion

Community garden projects cannot solve all the systemic problems faced by marginalized communities and people. That said, community gardens can be places in which a sense of belonging and inclusion is created that is not based on 'sameness' but on difference; a true celebration of diversity. In this paper, I presented six strategies that may help to create spaces of inclusion and belonging: meaningful consultation; accessible information and communication; accessible, welcoming garden design; inclusive and engaging programming; community empowerment beyond gardening; and encouraging attachment to place. Although not a template, these strategies may help community gardens to be places in which people can begin to collectively transform not only aspects of their individual lives but their neighbourhoods and even their cities. As Staeheli and Mitchell (2008) argue community gardens have the potential to take "public property and making it into public space" (p. 105)

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