



Actors and networks in urban community garden development



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ABSTRACT

Community gardens play a significant role in challenging neoliberal inequities by serving as spaces of alternative food production and community development activities in marginalized neighborhoods. While past research has explored the production of place in community gardens, less attention is paid to the role of social networks in garden development. Yet, network formation is critical for grassroots groups to navigate neoliberal governance and politics of power. This article draws on social network theories to examine the process of urban community garden development set within the context of neoliberalization. These theories provide a useful framework for evaluating networking as a spatial strategy and conceptualizing power relations within networks. We contend that forming spaces of engagement through scaled networks constituted by strong and weak ties is an essential means by which actors obtain information and leverage resources necessary to build and maintain urban community gardens. However, we also find that these networks contain power hierarchies that shape the conditions for participation in the networks. Actors with fewer resources and lesser political clout are compelled to conform to the interests of powerful actors. In employing social network theories to analyze urban community garden formation, this paper aims to achieve greater theorization and understanding of the complexities embedded in community garden development.

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1. Introduction

Within the last decade, community gardens in impoverished central city neighborhoods have emerged as important spaces of resistance against poverty and hunger. Community gardens provide antidotes to food insecurity, environmental degradation, and urban disinvestment (Pudup, 2008). They are important sites of citizenship practice and place-based community development (Armstrong, 2000; Baker, 2004; Kurtz, 2001; Schmelzkopf, 1995). Garden development can challenge hegemonic ideologies and assert rights to space for racially and economically marginalized citizens (Staehele et al., 2002). However, community gardens face significant barriers stemming from structural inequities and discriminatory neoliberal policies. Thus, gardens are also sites of conflict (Irazábal and Punja, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). These tensions compel community gardeners to engage in creative strategies and form networks of support. While past research acknowledges their importance, there is insufficient exploration of the role of networks in urban gardening.

We contend that formation of supportive networks is crucial for development and sustainability of community gardens in

marginalized neighborhoods against barriers caused by structural inequities and discriminatory neoliberal policies. We thus examine the process of network formation and its role in enabling community gardeners to navigate tensions of neoliberalism. Elsewhere we examine the potential of gardens as spaces of citizenship within the framework of neoliberalism. Our findings derive from case study research in the marginalized 'inner-city' Milwaukee neighborhood of Harambee, where gardens are positioned as responses to neoliberalization, diminished local urban food environments, and high land vacancy. This project extends our decade-long investigation into citizen participation and community development processes in Harambee and other Milwaukee inner-city neighborhoods. For this project, we gathered data from 2010 to 2012, employing qualitative research methods. We conducted twenty-one semi-structured, intensive interviews with actors involved in Harambee neighborhood community gardens, including residents, community garden organizers, and representatives from nonprofit organizations and city government agencies actively involved in gardening efforts.¹ Additionally, we engaged in participant

¹ Interview questions interrogated: (1) development processes of garden(s); (2) challenges faced (in garden development), how challenges are mitigated; (3) individuals and groups involved in garden(s); (4) organizational structure(s) of garden(s), including how decisions are made and how participation is structured. Interviewees representing organizations were asked about the organization's mission, activities, and structure (including staffing and funding sources).

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observation at four Harambee community gardens, attended relevant public meetings and conducted content analysis of planning and policy documents.

2. Neoliberalization and urban community gardens

Neoliberalization is theorized as a mode of political economic restructuring and a form of governmentality underpinned by specific ideologies about the appropriate relationship between the state, capital, and citizens. It occurs through creative destruction of existing institutional configurations and regulatory structures at multiple scales (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Neoliberalization entails state welfare retrenchment, privatization (via markets or civil society) of formerly public services and goods, devolution of responsibilities to lower levels of government, emphasis on partnerships and involvement of non-state actors in governance practices, fiscal austerity, and competitiveness at all government levels (Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002).

The erosion of the social wage under neoliberalization has exacerbated socioeconomic polarization and marginalization by increasing marginal employment and reducing social supports for low-income populations (Lightman et al., 2008; Piven, 2001). It has also heightened demand for social services provided privately or through voluntary and grassroots organizations (Newman and Lake, 2006). Due to diminished spending on urban green space, many poorer urban neighborhoods now experience limited access to green spaces (Heynen, 2003; Roy, 2010). Thus, although urban community gardens existed prior to neoliberalization, they have proliferated as a particular localized response to neoliberalization at the urban scale (Baker, 2004; Kurtz, 2001). Urban community gardens provide access to affordable nutritious foods and safe green space where it might otherwise be unavailable (Armstrong, 2000; Irazábal and Punja, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 1995). By improving built environmental quality, urban community gardens may also raise property values or stimulate investment in neighborhoods (Quastel, 2009).

Simultaneously, urban community gardens face heightened challenges in the context of neoliberalization. The neoliberal reorganization of space has manifested at the urban scale in part through land use conflicts between the state (or associated capital interests) and citizens. This has been particularly prominent around green space access, where the state's interest in privatizing land for development purposes directly confronts citizens' interests in maintaining open access to green space for community use (Smith and Kurtz, 2003; Staeheli et al., 2002). State disapproval of green space often takes on racialized or classist implications, as the state may promote certain kinds of space at the expense of others, in ways that constrict what kinds of people belong or do not belong in public space or what forms of public space are legitimate (Barraclough, 2009; Domene and Saurí, 2007). In many cases, the local state has evicted community gardens or imposed severe restrictions on their forms (Irazábal and Punja, 2009; Rosol, 2012; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). Although states often actively utilize green space development as a means of generating revenue or attracting capital investment, these efforts tend to be oriented towards wealthy consumers and highly managed in form, and states may thus continue to oppose community gardens, which they regard as hindering capital accumulation (Domene and Saurí, 2007; Perkins, 2009b, 2010; Quastel, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 2002). In this context, community gardens may face tenure insecurity, regulations constricting garden forms, or steep rents (Irazábal and Punja, 2009; Smith and Kurtz, 2003).

The expansion of voluntary sectors and localization of responsibility under neoliberalization may also constrain community garden development because it has produced more competitive

environments for grassroots organizing (Elwood, 2002; Ghose, 2005; Newman and Lake, 2006; Rosol, 2012). With the shift from government to shared or collaborative governance, local governments have promoted expanded roles for non-state actors in governance activities, including service provision and management, and participation in planning activities (Perkins, 2009b; Swyngedouw, 2005). While the shift to governance is discursively premised on increasing opportunities for civil society control, it has often diminished the power of civil society actors by compelling them to compete for resources and prioritize survival over political activism (Newman and Lake, 2006). This competitive context often leads to fragmentation of community organizing (Hackworth, 2007). Community organizations may also be coopted to support state agendas and accept responsibility for social service provision (Perkins, 2009a; Wolch, 1990; Trudeau, 2008). Grassroots community garden groups operate within these constraints and, due to their smaller size and less professionalized structure, may struggle to compete. Community gardening across a city may be fragmented and limited to neighborhoods where citizens already have access to material and social resources, resulting in challenges to establishing larger advocacy campaigns (Kurtz, 2001; Rosol, 2012; Smith and Kurtz, 2003).

Community groups have developed strategies to address these constraints, primarily through engaging in supportive networks of relationships (Armstrong, 2000; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). These networks may be material or discursive (Nicholls, 2009). Network development is a strategy often employed by marginalized actors, or actors experiencing barriers, to navigate constraints and leverage power (Featherstone, 2005; Ghose, 2007; Gilbert, 1998; Silvey, 2003). It appears to be particularly important for marginalized community organizations in neoliberal contexts, where resources are scarce and less secure (Elwood and Ghose, 2001).

Community garden groups utilize networks to negotiate land use conflicts, acquire material resources, and bolster advocacy (Irazábal and Punja, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003; Staeheli et al., 2002). These networks involve citizens, non-profit organizations, government agencies, and private funders (Armstrong, 2000; Baker, 2004; Kurtz, 2001). They enable community garden groups to acquire necessary organizational resources and technical knowledge (Armstrong, 2000; Pudup, 2008; Schmelzkopf, 1995). Smith and Kurtz (2003) argue, employing Cox's (1998) theorization of networks, that the use of social networks to fundraise enabled garden groups to expand the scale of the conflict beyond the local and beyond traditional circuits of capital by creating new 'spaces of engagement'. The next section provides further explication on network theories.

3. Theorizing social networks

3.1. Social networks as strategy

Social network formation is a critical strategy for grassroots community organizing and a mechanism by which actors construct spaces to defend their interests (Cox, 1998). Network theories have evolved to explain interactions between individual actors and the social relations within which they are embedded, while balancing between roles of structure and agency.

Actor network theory (ANT) emphasizes the dynamic, evolutionary, flexible and unpredictable nature of networks. It advances the importance of the interaction of human actors and nonhuman actants, working together to form flexible heterogeneous networks (Latour, 1987; Law, 1992; Murdoch, 1997, 1998). This approach is used in science and technology studies, in which knowledge is seen as a social construction produced by ordered networks of heterogeneous materials composed of humans and nonhumans

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