



Barriers to community garden success: Demonstrating framework for expert consensus to inform policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

Community gardens receive much attention for the benefits offered to participants and their communities. However, research has documented a variety of barriers and challenges that community gardeners and support organizations face in establishing and maintaining gardens. These issues may dilute service providers' impact, by reducing their attention to the more pressing factors that result in garden failure. Additionally, access to resources to mitigate these challenges and barriers differ from region to region. This demonstrates a significant need to identify the most pervasive barriers, challenges and obstacles in order to refine the focus of support programs and provide concentrated efforts to better position community gardens for success. The purpose of the study was to demonstrate the use of a framework to inform the development of policies and programs that stakeholders, including Extension, can adopt for overcoming the most frustrating impediments to success. It did so by using an underused but appropriately matched tool, the Delphi technique, which can easily be adopted by community garden stakeholders. Because the types of stakeholders are diverse and challenges are complex, the objectives were to determine whether consensus could be achieved and whether a core set of barriers exist. The group agreed upon four barriers, with the highest level of agreement centering on the challenge of time demand for community engagement.

1. Introduction

Community gardens receive much attention for the benefits offered to participants and their communities. Research often focuses on the positive physical and social benefits that community gardens provide to participants and neighborhoods. However, gardens face significant challenges to success and sustainability. In a survey of 445 organizations that support 8550 gardens in the United States and Canada, Drake and Lawson (2015a) found that from 2007 to 2012, 1615 gardens had been lost. Participants reported that lack of interest by gardeners, loss of land and funding were the reasons gardens ceased operating. The ability of community gardens and support organizations to mitigate garden loss is essential to sustained community and individual benefits. Additionally, mitigating these losses may be an important precursor for achieving continued support and resources from policymakers and funders.

Current research documents a variety of physical barriers and challenges that community gardeners and support organizations face in developing and sustaining gardens. One salient challenge is obtaining long-term land tenure that is supported by policy and planning (Drake

and Lawson, 2014, 2015a; Lawson, 2004; Mikulec et al., 2013; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004; Wakefield et al., 2007). Community gardens located on vacant land are threatened by development (Drake and Lawson, 2014; Wakefield et al., 2007), which can create uncertainty among gardeners of the future of their gardens (Wakefield et al., 2007). In addition to not being able to acquire permanent land, the physical attributes of garden sites can also create obstacles, including soil contamination (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015; Wakefield et al., 2007), water access (Drake and Lawson, 2015b; Wakefield et al., 2007) and lack of available facilities, such as restrooms (Kingsley et al., 2009). Once gardens are built, resources, such as soil, compost, fertilizer, and seeds are in continual demand (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015; Drake and Lawson, 2015a; Gregory et al., 2016; Wakefield et al., 2007). Funding to support recurring costs for established gardens can be more difficult to obtain than for new gardens (Drake and Lawson, 2015a). Further, funding for support staff at individual garden sites and for supporting organizations, such as Extension (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015; Wakefield et al., 2007) can also challenge growth and sustainability.

Individual and community barriers and challenges also influence

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garden success and sustainability. For potential and current gardeners, the time commitment can be a challenge (Kingsley et al., 2009). Also lack of interest and participation (Drake and Lawson, 2015a), low visibility of the garden (Milliron et al., 2017), absence of technical skills (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015), and distance to a garden site (Kingsley et al., 2009), can be significant barriers though research is mixed on the final factor listed (Milliron et al., 2017). Gardeners also need assistance with strategies to reach out to the community at large and to increase support (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015; Drake and Lawson, 2015a,b). At the community level, research suggests resource disparities exist among low-income gardeners and communities of color. Low-income gardeners may have more difficulty contributing financial resources to a garden (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015; Wakefield et al., 2007). Further, communities of color may have unequal access to political leaders and groups, thus limiting the ability to secure public resources and funds (Cohen and Reynolds, 2015).

Providing community garden support often requires interactions across scales as communities, non-governmental organizations and government agencies plan and implement community gardens (Drake and Lawson, 2015b). Challenges arise as the network of highly contextualized agencies and programs, which vary from town, municipality, county, and state, deliver garden support. Included in this garden support network are local county extension offices, which assist community gardeners in various technical and educational capacities through workshops, site visits, demonstration gardens, and plant clinics in addition to other services. The variety of issues faced by community gardens may mean that service providers (those that provide educational and technical assistance) are stretched thin and cannot devote attention to the central factors that result in garden loss. Additionally, access to resources to mitigate these challenges and barriers may differ from region to region. This demonstrates a significant need to identify the most pervasive barriers, challenges and obstacles in order to refine the focus of support programs and provide concentrated efforts to better position community gardens for success.

This aforementioned situation exists in the state of Florida, the focus of this study, where a complex network of stakeholder groups are providing garden support. Within this network there are state organizations that deliver educational and technical assistance to ensure the successful development and sustainability of these gardens including the Florida Department of Health (FDOH, 2018) and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF-IFAS, 2018). These statewide organizations are uniquely positioned to provide meaningful support through their expansive footprint of local offices that foster a connection between the state organization and community members. These organizations and their collaborative partners have the potential to develop broad scale solutions to overcome the significant challenges that community gardens and gardeners face that will better position them for success.

Since overcoming the barriers and challenges to the success of community gardens takes a collaborative effort among garden stakeholders and support providers, developing agreement on common issues is essential. Developing group consensus has been shown to be a critical element to facilitating effective joint problem-solving across the includes multiple organizations across various contexts (Hesse et al., 2015; Innes, 1996; Innes and Booher, 1999; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; Pondy, 1967). In Florida, the barriers that impede the success have yet to be outlined in the literature, making this exercise especially salient among the study participants and the future of community gardens in the state. The purpose of this study was to apply a well-suited but underutilized tool, the Delphi technique, which all community garden stakeholders, including Extension, can easily adopt to move a group towards consensus. Given the diversity of challenges and stakeholders, the objective was to determine whether a core set of barriers exist for the successful development and sustainability of community gardens. Demonstrating consensus on core barriers and obstacles provides a critical first step for developing solutions that may provide mutual gain

by mitigating common issues.

2. Collaboration, consensus-building and the Delphi technique

The success of community gardens at a large scale is predicated on successful collaboration of multiple stakeholder groups. Collaboration can be defined as the activity of working together towards a common goal that integrates numerous elements including communication, co-operation, and responsiveness (Hesse et al., 2015). Consensus building among stakeholders is frequently leveraged to explore complex situations and has been lauded as a more systematic and sophisticated communicative form of collaborative problem solving across sectors (Innes and Booher, 1999). Consensus building has emerged as a deliberation technique with the potential to bring about transformation by providing the opportunity to reformulate comprehensive planning in collaborative settings (Innes and Booher, 1999; Innes, 1996).

Building consensus is important in today's society because many of the problems that exist affect diverse groups of people with different interests (Burgess and Spangler, 2003). As problems accumulate and become more complex, the stakeholders and organizations that deal with the problems tend to rely on each other for assistance and become interdependent. Consensus-building processes allows a variety of people to have input in defining the problem and providing solutions, rather than leaving these decisions up to single organizations or experts (Burgess and Spangler, 2003). Utilizing this consensus building for joint-problem solving helps to mitigate potential conflict and the divergence of goals that is typically seen when decisions are made in isolation (Pondy, 1967).

To facilitate the development of salient solutions, the network of stakeholders must first develop consensus on the problem at hand. Malek (2013) explains that the goal of this initial assessment centers on gathering information from key stakeholders to identify common issues and barriers that need to be addressed (Malek, 2013). This process allows for joint problem solving efforts to effectively frame the issues and promotes the development of mutual gain solutions. (Burgess and Spangler, 2003; Innes and Booher, 1999; Malek, 2013).

Although consensus building is seen an important technique for collaborative problem solving, the persistence of organizational silos and fragmentation along with value diversity makes achieving consensus about the nature of problems more difficult (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). This makes finding an effective process for achieving consensus paramount. The Delphi technique is a widely used and accepted method for achieving convergence of opinion concerning real-world knowledge solicited from experts within certain topic areas (Hsu and Sandford, 2007). It is a research-based approach used to solicit, collate, and direct responses to achieve consensus among a group of experts and has been cited as an effective means from structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals to address a complex situation (Delp et al., 1977; Linstone and Turoff, 2002; Warner, 2015). The Delphi technique can be used to achieve the following objectives:

1. To determine or develop a range of possible program alternatives;
2. To explore or expose underlying assumptions or information leading to different judgments;
3. To seek out information which may generate a consensus on the part of the respondent group;
4. To correlate informed judgments on a topic spanning a wide range of disciplines, and;
5. To educate the respondent group as to the diverse and interrelated aspects of the topic (Delbecq et al., 1975, p. 11).

The Delphi technique has been cited as a well-suited method for consensus building that uses a series of questionnaires to collect data from a panel of selected subjects (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963; Dalkey, 1969; Hsu and Sandford, 2007; Lindeman, 1981; Linstone and Turoff,

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