



# Community gardens in Israel: Characteristics and perceived functions



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## ABSTRACT

In light of a growing awareness that quality green open spaces are an important part of healthy and sustainable cities this paper seeks to examine the rapidly developing Israeli community gardens (CG). As most of the contemporary academic literature regarding CG relies predominantly on North American experience, this article wishes to explore the extent and characteristics of CGs in Israel and the local public's involvement in these projects in order to enrich the global insight about this growing phenomenon. The data were obtained through survey questionnaire distributed to 44 CG coordinators followed by field work conducted in four CGs. Our findings show that, consistently with research in North America and Europe, Israeli CGs serve as community anchors and demonstrate the potential to be sites of encounter for different groups of city residents. Another important function of Israeli CGs is creating civically engaging green open space and allowing urban dwellers access to the land. Our findings indicate that CGs in highly urbanized and multicultural societies have the potential to engage diverse communities and provide a valuable site for civic engagement with urban public spaces.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a growing global recognition that the quality of public spaces and the urban atmosphere influence the quality of life for city-dwellers. In increasing number of cities worldwide we witness proliferation of environmental, community based initiatives to improve the quality of urban public space. One form of such effort is urban community garden (CG). CGs are described as a green space managed (and often initiated and developed) by a neighborhood community which hosts urban gardening activities. A CG may range from an assortment of plots worked individually, with some communal management, to projects that explicitly engage the community in collective activity (Holland, 2004; Guitart et al., 2012).

Current academic literature on CGs is dominated by USA and research based on experience outside of industrial, western, English speaking countries is very scarce. Particular historical and social factors associated with the development of USA cities limit the capacity to generalize the results of research on CGs in USA to other geographical and social settings (Guitart et al., 2012). In order to increase the geographical scope of research on CGs we suggest Israel as an informative case outside of USA and European context. We have conducted an exploratory, empirical study on CGs of Israel

with the objective to provide an overview of this, as we will show, emerging phenomenon. We ask firstly: What are the scope and the characteristics of the community garden movement in Israel? What is the profile of garden users? What are the objectives for their establishment and which organizations and institutions support CGs. Secondly, we asked do Israeli CGs fulfill functions ascribed to them in other countries.

Israel is multicultural society comprised of diverse nationalities, religions and communities. Israeli population is fragmented by cleavage and conflicts among such religious and ethnic groups as Arab Minority and Jewish majority, orthodox and secular Jewish groups and ethnic fragments within the Jewish population (Samooha, 1990; Katz-Gerro and Shavit, 1998). Today some 53% of the Israelis are first generation immigrants. Immigrants'origins, occupational skills, educational levels, sizes of immigration waves and significantly state policies of absorption also laid the base for much of the ethnical fragmentation and stratification of contemporary Israeli society (Bar-Haim and Semyonov, 2015). These cleavages are manifested by national as well as urban residential patterns, separate institutions and education systems, language differences, segregated leisure activities and separated cultural outlets. There are also important socio-economic differences between the ethnic groups that persist through generations (Katz-Gerro and Shavit, 1998; Goldscheider, 2015).

USA based research shows that CGs can play a role in integrating urban residents into denser network of relations and has a bridging potential in racially diverse neighborhoods (Glover, 2004; Shinew et al., 2004; Glover et al., 2005). CG programs appear to facilitate

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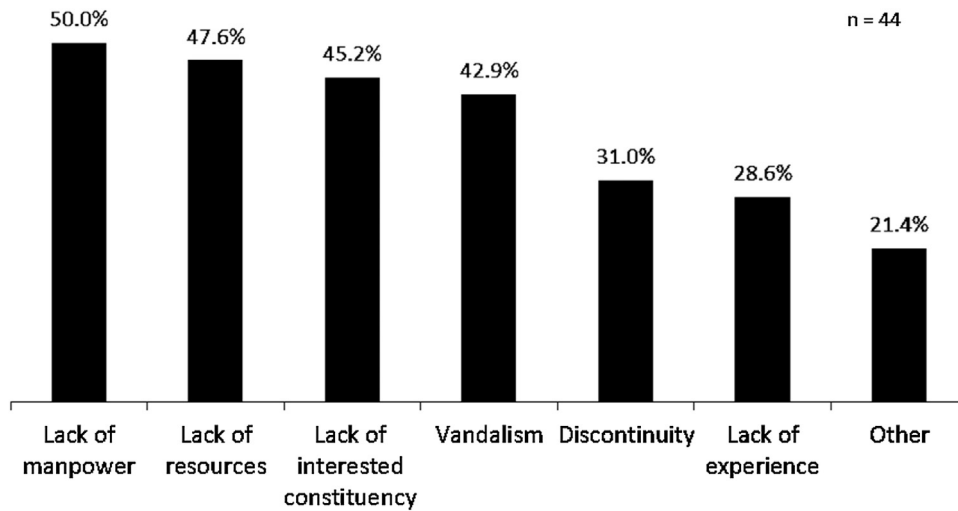


Fig. 1. Challenges to community garden activity according to coordinators.

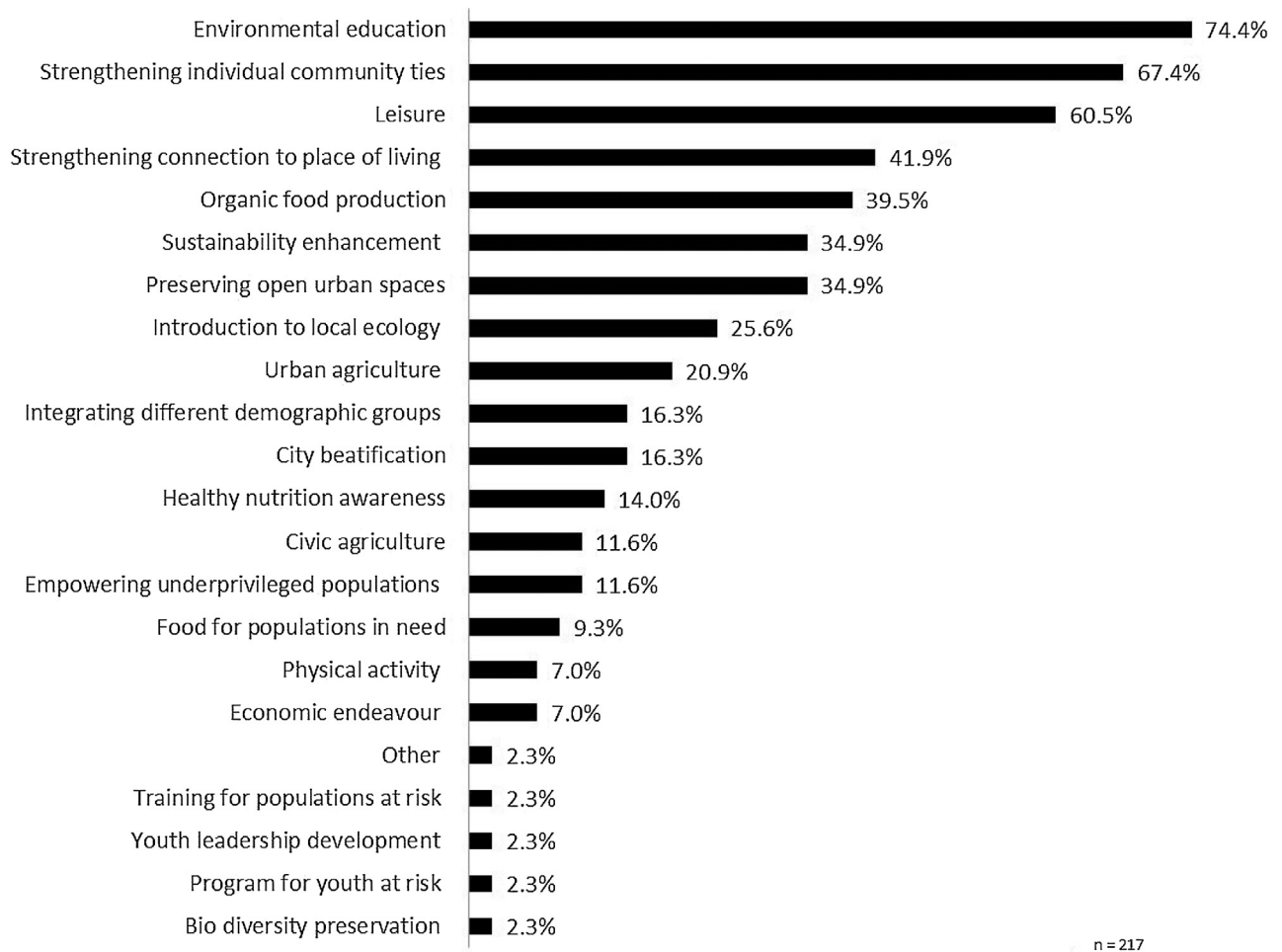


Fig. 2. Primary objectives for community garden establishment according to coordinators.

collective efficacy, the creation of social networks and improved organizational capacity that are particularly important to marginalized urban populations such as the elderly, immigrants and the poor (Armstrong, 2000; Twiss et al., 2003; Teig et al., 2009). Moreover, it is argued that while access to urban green space is often highly stratified based on income, ethno-racial characteristics, age and

gender (Wolch et al., 2014), CGs have the potential to approximate nature for a wider urban public (Borrelli, 2008).

Access to nature is not trivial in Israel as more than 93% of its population resides in the cities with population growing annually at 1.9% (Goldscheider, 2015). Rapid development often alters the urban landscape, affecting not only ecosystems but also the city residents exposed to a range of environmental impacts

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