

**Activity Enhancing Urban Spaces –
new green potentials for local action.**

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Introduction

Urban agriculture and gardening strategies are increasing in popularity in metropolitan areas as a mean of developing smarter and more sustainable cities. For citizens, gardening represents a way to reconnect with nature and gain more control over the local food system – a way to increase food sovereignty, food justice and food citizenship (Wekerle, 2004). It also offers an opportunity to increase social cohesion in the urban neighborhoods (Kweon et al, 1998). For young people in educational settings there are reports that hands-on school gardening might positively affect food intake. For instance, Ratcliffe et al. (2010) found an increased consumption of vegetables in schools that had gardens compared to those that did not. Also a number of studies suggest that there is a link between hands-on food activities and food literacy among young people. However, the literature that looks at how different social groups and stakeholders in the local community work together to establish and maintain gardening action is more limited. Evidence suggests that development of successful gardening initiatives in local communities is a challenging process that seems to be dependent on the resources, commitment and mobilization of multiple stakeholders (de Zeeuw & Dubbeling, 2015).

Aim

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of local stakeholders and the contribution they can make in the development of activity enhancing urban spaces. This paper uses community and educational gardening program of Ellebjerg neighborhood to study this and seeks to answer the following questions: How can seniors and children work together to build and develop the garden? What are the preferences and the needs of the two age groups, and how can the interaction between the two groups get established and developed? How can we understand how stakeholders in the local community engage, interact and cooperate in the development of the garden.

Conceptual foundation

Conceptually, the study builds on stakeholder theory (Mitchell et al, 1997) arguing that for undertakings in open social systems to be successful, a multitude of stakeholders' needs to engage and for such engagement to take place, a detailed insight into measures of power, legitimacy and urgency among these stakeholders is needed. We further apply the idea of action research and knowledge triangles in order to develop the case and to be able to apply the resources of researchers and students from Aalborg University.

We build on the concept of service learning defined by Bandy (2016) as a “teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Bandy, 2016). As opposed to internships and volunteering Bandy's concept of service learning uses “structured, critical inquiry” to bring about change. This facilitates establishing partnerships between the university and

the communities that are mutually beneficial for both parties. The service learning approach goes hand in hand with Problem Based Learning (Wood, 2003) applied at the university in the teaching about food. Problem Based Learning takes real-life problem cases as their point of departure and enables students to plan and carry out independent and self-directed research and to apply the particular theories and methodologies needed to solve the specific problems of the “problem-case”.

The paper further builds on the action-research tradition (Lewin, 1947). By using this approach, researchers and students engage in a dual stranded process in which research and collection of empirical data take place at the same time as researchers and students engage in concrete actions aiming at develop the case.

Methods

The Ellebjerg case is part of the Aalborg University Campus' Community program and its civic university strategy. Due to its proximity of the university campus, the case function as a Problem Based Learning case in which students at the graduate study program [Integrated Food Studies](#) can carry out assignments in relation to food, greening and urban spaces. At the same time, it functions as a research case. Since many students have a serious interest in studying urban gardening and agriculture, the case functions as an example for action research and a knowledge triangle demonstration case.

The gardening action aims to engage different age groups from the local community in learning about gardening and growing of plant foods and as such it is aiming at developing an intergenerational link. The gardening action evolve around a green space with a small lake affiliated the Ellebjerg public elementary school. The green space serves two purposes: an educational one for the students at the school and a community one for a group of retired people and other citizens in the neighborhood. The school shares the green space with the neighboring local senior action group that uses the neighborhood cottage (Kvartershytten) as a basecamp for their activities. In this way, the green space although formally owned by the school acts as a community garden.

The current study has followed - and most importantly interacted - with the case over a 2 year period. By following and observing the case, we collect empirical data about the progress and by interacting we participate as action researchers in order to make the action happen. Methodologically, we study the case using individual as well as group interviews with school teachers, school management, the urban renewal initiative, an action group for the elderly local community active, Aalborg University graduate food students and researchers and an external consultant from the Ministry of Housing, Rural and Urban Affairs. The vision of the garden is to create – *to place make* - an exemplary garden, which at the same time can function as a research object for the partners in the knowledge triangle. The initial steps in the process have been reported in Mikkelsen and Jørgensen (2015). As part of the building of a common stakeholder platform and mutual understanding between actors, a *workshop* between all the actors of the garden were arranged. The aim was to build a mutual strategy and discuss how the formal project management of the development and implementation of the garden could be operationalized in the future

For the data collection and empirical part of the study, individual and focus group interviews with seniors, kids and teachers were used to gain an insight into the different users of the shared garden. The purpose of the interviews was to represent the daily use of the garden and the relationship

between kids and seniors that use the same area. The data collection was aiming at disclosing the motivation and attitudes of three important stakeholder groups. The *student interviews* were carried out with six young people from the 7th, 8th and 9th grade and sampled via the student council. For the *interviews with the elderly*, we enrolled seven women and one man from the *Kvartershytten* cottage – the local basecamp for the senior action group. For the school actors, focus group interviews were carried out with *three teachers* from Ellebjerg School.

Findings

The insights gained from the interviews indicate that the different stakeholders have rather different sets of attitudes and aspirations when it comes to working together on developing the green space to a valuable local resources. Interviews suggest that for action researcher and community activists it is important to take into account the power/resource as well as urgency and legitimacy aspects of the multiple stakeholders. The interviews illustrate some of the tensions that exist between stakeholders and that needs to be aligned and dealt with if a garden case as the one in Ellebjerg should be successfully developed

For the seniors, the gardening action evolving around the senior action group offers daily activities and a communal eating twice a week with around 25 seniors participating each time. Gardening of the communal green space is one of the favorite activities according to interviewees. As seniors Martha and Klara puts it:

“A lot of things happen for the elderly. I must say that I am very impressed with all the activities that are arranged. I do not join all of them but if people can walk on their own they have plenty of things to do”

“One has never had as much to do as when one retires.”

However, engaging in cross generational activities was not considered as a straight forward option. One senior phrased the concern as follows:

“Sometimes we as seniors feel it is challenging to have kids running around all the time”

In the initial state, the seniors did not have a lot to do with the schoolkids and they seemed to be somewhat hesitating to engage in more interaction. As phrased by Klara:

“The kids can sometimes run around and play, but otherwise no. Sometimes they borrow our barbecue but we do not see them that much.”

On the question of whether they had ambitions of developing their relations with the young people at school, most of the seniors were skeptical. As Hanne – one of the senior activists – put it

“I don’t think that we have the surplus energy to do that.””

The reservations seem to be due a fear of losing too much influence in the gardening practices. Or as Martha expressed it:

*“Suddenly they think that you want to do it
all the time and then you risk committing yourself too much”.*

In addition, the people at the activity house expressed the view that the teachers did not really care about the activities in the senior part of the gardening. Joan, one of the activity employees, and Gerta, one of the seniors, referred to an incident where one of them went to a street party and were by coincidence seated next to a teacher from the school that had said:

*“Oh, you are one of the people from the house at the garden! And she continued
“Tell me what are you actually doing?” The teacher didn’t know anything about us!”*

For the students, the interviews revealed that none of the kids had a garden at home, so the fact that they were going to work in a garden was in general viewed as being a very exciting opportunity. At the time of the interviews, students were not allowed to use the garden in the breaks and the gate from the school to the garden was kept locked as a default. The students felt this as being very unfair to them and did not feel that they had anything to do with “the seniors over there”. As it was phrased by the student Mads:

*“Interaction? No, not at all.
We are not allowed over there!”*

As part of the garden, the students reported that there is a small overgrown area with benches close to the garden, which according to them are never used. They found that the benches were rotten and broken, and that the smells of rotten apples were unpleasant. They also reported that the garden – despite its obvious potentials – was barely used in classes and subjects.

*“Rare”, “Very rare!,
Last year we only went there once!”*

Some of the students suggested that the garden could be a place specially reserved for the older students – the 7-9th grade students. A place without the traditional supervision of a teacher on playground watch. They would love to have more activities as for instance campfire evenings in which also food, cooking and eating could be included

For the three teachers of natural sciences subjects that gave interviews, it became clear that they primarily used the garden ad hoc in their teaching when they felt it made sense in relation to the study program. They did not use it on a permanent basis due to the logistical and planning aspects were perceived as challenging. They pointed to three important points that was perceived as constraints to further development of the garden. The question of allocation of gardening hours. The question of student safety issues needs to be handled especially since the garden includes a small lake. The question of organizing the garden according to the need for maintenance, tools and signposting and organized with signs. As Lars – one of the teachers - expressed it

“When you bring the kids there to show them an oregano plant, you need to use at least an hour to find it yourself.”

Discussion

The insights from the Ellebjerg program so far show that despite the fact that a broad range of local community stakeholders support the idea of a community garden that can accommodate the dreams and ambitions of the different types of users, there is a number of constraints and obstacles that need to be dealt with and overcome in order for the case to further develop into a best practice. Problems include a lack of initiative from the daily users of the garden to engage in the necessary interplay and development. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that there is a lack of communication between the involved institutions. It seems that opinion leaders, local activists, the academic partners and the municipal are some of the actors that has the necessary muscles and resources to facilitate the necessary actions.

Insights from the interviews suggest that communication and relations management between the patchworks of actors might help create mutual trust and commitment. It means that seniors, teachers, school management, municipal workers, children, university students and researchers all have important roles to play. This is especially the case for the actors that have the resources available to take the lead and show initiative. The case shows that the power, legitimacy and urgency typology provide a convenient framework for understanding the engagement of different stakeholders.

The development process in particular underlines that there is a need to discuss issues of formal ownership of the soil and land that is to be included in community garden program as the one of Ellebjerg. There is also a need to build a mutual strategy and discuss how formal project management can be operationalized in the future. The case also shows that it is possible to create citizen and community engagement through the addition of university resources such as practice-based learning and through knowledge transfer opportunities. Here use of participatory and visually assisted methods has proven to be useful (Mikkelsen 2016). The problem based learning approach has shown to be beneficial to both students' learning as well as to the local community. It underlines that higher education and science has an important role to play in such initiatives under conceptual umbrellas such as action research, scientific social responsibility and civic university.

It can be concluded that lack of mutual understanding of the needs of different social groups, intergenerational differences, lack of agreement on the proper balance between bottom up and top down leadership were some of the impediments to successful garden development. Also disagreement on formal ownership and access rights to the garden as well as resource constraints were found to be hindrances to proper development of the case. The experiences from the program show that creation of a multi stakeholder garden is a lengthy and time consuming process that requires establishment of good relations between the partner involved and the committed effort for a long range of stakeholders in the community. It also shows that the contribution from the actors of the knowledge triangle can make a positive contribution and that it at the same time can contribute to a relevant and meaningful Problem Based Learning for graduate students. The participation in such activities at the same time is a demonstration of the potentials of service learning where soon-to-graduate students at higher education engage in action research and co-creational based types of activities that is beneficial to local communities (Bandy, 2016).

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