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Factors That Contribute to Communities Establishing Sustainable Development Initiatives in Ireland

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Factors that contribute to communities establishing sustainable development initiatives in Ireland

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1. Introduction

Community gardens contribute to addressing a range of environmental, economic and social issues facing urban communities across the globe (Keeney, 2000; Calvin, 2011; McIvaine-Newsad and Porter, 2013). In response to the benefits that they generate, there has been a significant increase in community gardens internationally over the last thirty years (Firth *et al.*, 2011). Community gardens can be considered a form of sustainable development initiative (SDI). This paper is concerned with the factors that contribute to the establishment of sustainable development initiatives in Ireland by focusing on community gardens in Dublin City. The core question being addressed is:

What capacities are present in communities and how do they contribute to some communities being more receptive than others to sustainable development initiatives in Ireland?

The above question is one of the subsidiary questions of a PhD dissertation which aims, first, to examine the motivations for communities engaging in the development of sustainable development initiatives, and second, to examine the capacities required by communities aiming to establish and maintain sustainable development initiatives. Third, it will examine the characteristics that distinguish successful from unsuccessful SDIs.

The core question to be examined in the PhD is

What are the key factors that lead to the successful development of locally-based initiatives that contribute to the transition from the current model of local development to a more socially and environmentally sustainable model in Ireland?

The subsidiary questions are:

- Why do some communities engage in sustainable development initiatives¹ and not others?
- What capacities are present and how do they contribute to some communities being more receptive than others to sustainable development initiatives in Ireland?
- What are the differences between successful and unsuccessful implementation of sustainable development initiatives in Ireland?
 - Does the rationale for communities establishing sustainable development initiatives impact on the outcomes of these initiatives?

Section two of this paper examines the key concepts underpinning the research. The third section focuses on the motivations for communities to establish community gardens, followed by the theoretical framework for sustainable development initiatives in section four. This paper outlines a piece of research. The methodology for the research undertaken will then be outlined in section five. The penultimate section details the research findings. The discussion and conclusion is the final section of the paper.

¹ Sustainable development initiatives include energy, food and up-cycling initiatives. Transport initiatives are also a component of sustainable development initiatives but are not covered in this study.

2. Concepts

2.1. Sustainable development initiative

Sustainable development initiatives can be viewed as social enterprises with an environmental focus. Social enterprise has been defined in many different ways. Indeed, at European level there is no universally accepted definition of a social enterprise (GHK, 2006). However, the number of definitions of what constitutes a social enterprise reflects the diverse understanding of what a social enterprise actually is.

The UK's Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (2002) definition is widely used:

A social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for the purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.

The strength of the DTI definition is that it states that social enterprises have social and economic objectives. The principle of community or mutual ownership is alluded to, but the definition does not place significant weight on the fact that social enterprises are democratically governed by a group of people on behalf of a community or their members, rather than by shareholders seeking to maximise a return on their investment. The weakness of the DTI definition (with respect to ownership) is addressed by the European research network, EMES. In particular, the EMES definition states social enterprises are created voluntarily by groups of citizens and are governed by them, even though grant funding may be provided to these organisations (Nyssens, 2006a). Furthermore, this definition emphasises that social enterprises tend to involve those affected by the activity or represented and participate in their structures (Nyssens, 2006a).

2.2. Community gardens

There are a number of descriptions of what constitutes a community garden (Guitart *et al*, 2012). The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) considers a community garden to be a tract of land cultivated by a group of people (Teig *et al*, 2009). The shortcomings of this definition is it does not specify characteristics relating to governance, control, or access. Unlike the ACGA definition, community gardens can be defined in terms their collective ownership, control and access (Ferris *et al*, 2001). This approach has the advantage of distinguishing community gardens from private gardens (Ferris *et al*, 2001). An alternative perspective views community gardens as the manifestation of the urban commons in an urban setting, and which serve to challenge the dominant neo-liberal model of urban development (Eizenberg, 2012). This perspective fails to take into account the diverse motivations for establishing community gardens and the peripheral role that they can play in challenging the dominant model of urban development. In addition, it assumes that all initiators of community gardens are ideologically motivated to challenge the dominant model of urban development. Stocker and Barnett (1998) devised a typology which divides community gardens into three categories. One is a group of individual plots often referred to as allotments. The second are gardens which are governed by institutions that use gardening as a means of realising their objectives. The third category are collectively organised gardens that are accessible to and benefit the public. This framework is useful in contextualising the wide array of community gardens in Ireland.

Finally, Ferris *et al*. (2001) named eight different types of community gardens: leisure gardens; early education and school gardens; gardens targeting marginalised groups; therapy gardens; neighbourhood spaces; gardens promoting bio-diversity; commercial-orientated gardens and demonstration gardens.

There are a range of motivations for establishing community gardens which are outlined in the next section.

3. Motivations for establishing community gardens

The principals of community gardens hold various motivations for their establishment (Guitart *et al*, 2012). Community gardens provide a mechanism for communities having more control of the development of the physical space associated with their neighbourhood (Irvine, 1999). This paper did not delineate the level of capacity that governance structures of community gardens in affluent areas hold, compared with marginalised areas. Research conducted in the USA identified gardeners joining community gardens for social reasons, including meeting people from different ethnic backgrounds, and making new friends (Teig *et al*, 2009). Other social objectives included strengthening the capacity of the community to address local issues (Glover *et al*, 2005). Nettle (2009) identified motivations that benefited the individual, such as opportunities to engage in physical activity to improve health, and shared benefits such as fostering community engagement, growing food for distribution among members and promoting a culture of self-reliance. Research has identified that community gardens have been started to stimulate contact with nature (Stocker and Barrett, 1998), reducing the incidence of food poverty (Holland, 2004), and increasing bio-diversity (Nettle, 2009). It would seem from the above that social and educational objectives take precedence over food production. Community gardens can contribute to raising awareness of food provenance, tackling passive consumption of mass-produced food and connecting citizens back to growing food (Hill, 2011).

4. Theoretical framework

Sustainable development initiatives tend to be driven by a small cadre of volunteers who generally give a lot of their time to the development of such initiatives (Seyfang, 2007). However, their enthusiasm can often lead to them becoming 'burnt out', and isolated from other residents in the community who do not share their passion for sustainable development initiatives (Middlemiss and Parish, 2010). Therefore, an examination of the capacities critical to the implementation of successful sustainable development initiatives could assist communities and policy-makers alike.

There are four categories of capacity which constitute the theoretical framework.

Pringle (2015) defines individual capacity as the level of skills, values, and finance that individuals within a community possess which can assist in the formation of sustainable development initiatives – focusing on renewable energy. Middlemiss and Parrish (2009) assert that an individual's social context shapes their capacity to initiate sustainable development initiatives. Indeed, Robbins and Rowe (2002) hold that the capacity for individuals to act is linked to the resource availability within a community.

The structural capacity of a community is concerned with the culture and values pertaining to organisations within a community that have an influence over communities' efforts to implement sustainable development initiatives (Middlemiss and Parish, 2009).

Infrastructural capacities refer to the stock of infrastructure that are present in communities which are conducive to the drive to promote sustainability.

Finally, cultural capacity refers to the level of commitment and openness to sustainability that exists within a community. The cultural capacity is influenced by the level of commitment to the values associated within the community, and the historical context towards sustainability. Middlemiss and Parrish (2009) assert that the above four capacities are interlinked and each can have an impact on another.

This paper will explain why some communities are better placed to succeed than others to establish community gardens. It will illustrate that urban communities, particularly socio-economically marginalised communities encounter a greater array of challenges in their efforts to establish community gardens which tend not be encountered by SDIs being established in rural settings.

According to Okvat and Zautra (2011), accessing suitable land, acquiring sufficient volunteers and sourcing leadership are the key challenges encountered by urban communities striving to establish community gardens. With regard to securing land and start-up capital, local authorities perform a critical role in the establishment of urban community gardens (Holland, 2004). However it is the experience of some communities that local authorities are not proactive in assisting communities to form community gardens. Some communities are not in a position to access land necessary to initiate and successfully establish community gardens due a deficit in expertise (Hope and Alexander, 2008). To address this deficit, particularly in less affluent areas, the assistance of local authorities is necessary (Holland, 2004). However, the compartmentalisation of local authorities can make it difficult for community groups, particularly those without the relevant expertise, to access effective supports from local authorities or municipalities (Hope and Alexander, 2008). With the retrenchment of the state, there is less funding for local authorities to resource communities to establish community gardens (Jereme and Wakefield, 2013).

Local authorities need to place procedural and distributive justice at the centre of their work and allocate resources to communities based on the needs of communities (Jereme and Wakefield, 2013).

5. Methodology

5.1. Case selection

Four case studies were selected in the Dublin city area for this paper. Social class in Ireland has a profound impact on people's economic and social well-being (Breen *et al.*, 1990). Hence, the case studies selected are on the basis of their socio-economic profile.

The four community gardens selected were:

- Santry Community Garden located in a municipal park on Dublin's Northside;
- Sitric Community Garden, which is a small community garden located in Dublin's North Inner City;
- Ballymun Muck and Magic community garden located in Ballymun on Dublin's Northside;
- Cherry Orchard Community Garden, based in Cherry Orchard, which is located in the south west of the city.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to make contact with key individuals associated with community gardens located in affluent areas of Dublin in order to gain their consent to participate in the research.

5.2. Methods

Semi-structured interviews were held with key individuals who were gardeners associated with the four community gardens. The interviews were held, in the main, at the interviewees' respective community garden, and they lasted between forty minutes and one hour. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to conduct focus groups with the committees or steering committees responsible for the governance of each of the community gardens. However, it is planned to hold these focus groups over the summer period. In addition, semi-structured interviews will be held with non-core members of each of the community gardens.

5.3. Data collection and coding

A list of trigger questions (see Appendix 1) was used to guide the interviews, and some additional questions were posed, depending on each interviewee's responses. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

5.4. Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed to formulate themes from the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process entailed reading each of the transcriptions a number of times in order to become familiar with the data. The text of each of the transcriptions was then coded. The following eight themes were identified: getting started; organisational maintenance; building effective operations; sustainability; intrinsic values; stakeholder engagement; future challenges; and impacts. The codes and associated data were categorised under the relevant themes. A small number of the sub-themes were previously used in article published by Teig *et al.* (2009).

6. Findings

6.1. Getting started

A number of sub-themes will be employed to detail the research findings associated with the theme of 'getting started'.

6.1.1. Securing land

Gardeners interviewed mentioned how crucial it was to secure land. They pursued two approaches in their efforts to secure a suitable tract of land. One entailed engaging with their respective local authority. Some community gardens were familiar with who to contact in their local authority, either through working in a professional capacity or volunteering activities:

"X made contact with Dublin City Council and Y and made arrangements that we could use the site to set up a community garden".

In one area, prior to when the group had formed, two individuals interested in gardening were fortunate to meet a local authority official who had the decision-making authority to allocate land and who was also well-disposed to the concept of community gardens.

"It was fortunate that we met representatives of Fingal County Council who had no use for a walled garden. A number of individuals came together to form a community garden. It was a conversation with a local authority official which led to us to getting the garden."

In another area, representatives of a regeneration board approached senior personnel in the local authority to secure land for a community garden, following a community consultation which highlighted residents' interest in having a community garden.

The second approach involved two individuals endeavouring to identify the ownership of a vacant plot of land close to where they lived. When the ownership of the plot could not be ascertained, the individuals commenced preparing the plot for a community garden.

A number of gardeners referred to the opportune time the approach was made to the local authority.

"I applied to the council for the land and they were glad to give it to us because there was a big fall at the time, there was no money in the country so we started up the community garden."

Due to the demand for land since the start of the economic recovery, gardeners are not convinced that they would now receive the same response from local authorities for a request for land.

6.1.2. Preparatory work

A number of community gardeners mentioned the amount of work required to prepare the land for growing vegetables.

“...A lot of people forget that the ground is properly, you know composted, you know that you’ve got good manure in it.”

Gardeners described the process of preparing the land for growing vegetables and fruit, and they spoke about the work being invisible.

6.1.3. Expertise

The groups that formed to establish community gardens possessed a range of skills. One gardener referred to there being two distinct sets of expertise. One was associated with undertaking administrative tasks of the community garden such as possessing the capacity to complete funding applications to a high standard, planning activities and preparing accounts.

“X did quite a good deal of fundraising through various organisations the main one being the Community Foundation of Ireland...”

The other type of expertise was gardening skills and knowledge. Gardeners spoke of how possessing expertise in gardening can facilitate the development of their garden. Furthermore, members with gardening expertise can prevent errors in cultivation which can result in poor vegetables yields. Gardeners mentioned that crop failures can undermine members’ enthusiasm and even contribute to inexperienced gardeners giving-up.

A small number of gardeners expressed the view that experts can be disempowering in the development of a community gardening group. Rather than this happening, they were of the view that a group could source the essential information from websites and this can galvanise the group through learning together.

“So there is so much online now, there’s so much available and plenty of books out there to start a community garden, I don’t think you really need much expertise.”

Gardeners associated with one garden spoke about different types of expertise being sourced from professional workers employed by a local development organisation.

6.2. Organisational maintenance

The theme of ‘organisational maintenance’ will be examined by utilising the following sub-themes: core group, collaborative culture, and norms.

6.2.1. Core group

The interviewees mentioned the importance of having a core group of active gardeners comprised of a minimum of four members. Gardeners spoke about the core group performing a variety of functions. These included opening the garden, devising work plans, countering setbacks, dealing with conflict, ensuring members were included in activities and setting an example of undertaking physical work associated with gardening.

“Yeah a group of people were willing to be committed, you know, and to be in it for the long haul through the rough as well as the smooth patches.”

6.2.2. Collaborative culture

Gardeners spoke of the importance to the success of their community garden of members working and interacting collaboratively.

“And indeed, all the members must be able to work and associate with others collaboratively and make decisions regarding the future of garden in a collaborative manner.”

According to a number of gardeners, collaborative culture is underpinned by a combination of consensual decision-making and lateral organisational structures. Indeed, some gardeners commented that a collaborative style of working would be undermined if community gardens established a hierarchical structure.

“The challenge is to maintain the organisation operates as a committee and makes decisions by a consensus.”

At the outset, a number of interviewees commented on the difficulties in working and interacting collaboratively, as there were strong personalities involved. However, the time spent in getting to know each other's perspective and mediating differences was vital to developing a collaborative approach to working.

A number of interviewees spoke of the importance of collaboration extending to all aspects of interaction, such as undertaking gardening activities. Experienced gardeners sharing their knowledge with novice gardeners was deemed an important element of collaboration. This resulted in strengthening cohesiveness among the membership.

“..I mean X is a qualified horticulturalist and Y has a lot of practical experience and I had some experience myself so yeah, it is necessary to have at least one or two people having gardening expertise that can advise the other participants.”

Collaboration can be a challenge for some individuals who are used to tending to their own private garden which does not require them to consult and work as part of a team. The overwhelming majority of members adapt to working and interacting in a collaborative manner. According to a number of those interviewed, a very small cohort of gardeners find it impossible to adapt to volunteering in such an environment, due to not having adequate social skills. The leaders in two community gardens challenged individuals who crudely corrected other gardeners for making gardening errors. These confrontations upset the individuals who were corrected. In one community garden, after every effort was made to support those concerned to modify their behaviour, they were asked to leave.

“They were wired not to change, not to be consensual. Out of 300 members who got involved in the garden in the past six years, they were balanced in their views and work and engage with individuals in a collaborative manner. Two people had to leave as they were rigid in what they needed to be done that they discouraged people from doing things. This was done for the greater good of the garden as they were discouraging people from doing things.”

6.2.3. Norms

Gardeners frequently spoke about community gardens valuing every individual's contribution, and that other gardeners were encouraged to work at their own pace. Linked to working at their own pace, members are encouraged to undertake work that they enjoyed and that they had the capacity to undertake. Indeed, interviewees mentioned the importance of valuing older members' presence, even if the older members were not in a position to work.

With regard to values, a number of interviewees were emphatic that discriminatory opinions concerning different social groups would not be tolerated. Gardeners mentioned the need

for members to comply to a set of rules. The most common rule cited was the prohibition of members to help themselves to vegetables and fruit from the garden.

“... some rules have to be, we make sure, people can't just go and help themselves to vegetables because occasionally we've had people taking the piss, so we have little rules like that...”

The members observed a code of behaviour in one of the gardens. There was unanimous buy-in from all of the members. In addition to the prohibition on taking garden produce, other components of the code of practice were that:

- Gardeners were encouraged to share their knowledge with other members;
- Gardeners were encouraged to welcome new members to the garden and ensure that they do not feel isolated; and
- Gardeners were expected to interact with all members

6.2.4. Reciprocity

Gardeners spoke about members who work in the garden gaining a share of the harvested produce. Some gardeners declined to take their share. The point was made that giving community organisations a gift of flowers and shrubs is effective at building relationships with other members.

6.2.5. Leadership

Interviewees frequently emphasised how leadership provides continuity to the community gardens' operations. A number of interviewees were of the opinion that leadership is collective in nature as different individuals take on different leadership roles. An alternative model of leadership was mentioned which takes the form of a lone facilitator. This arose from a reluctance of members to take on leadership roles.

“..trying to get somebody else you, everybody would tell you how valuable this thing is but, ...getting somebody to take over actually has been impossible.”

Member engagement was deemed a priority function of a community garden leader. The effective performance of this function required leaders to be creative and to delegate responsibility. Leaders needed to possess effective conflict resolution skills.

“These tensions can be mediated by the two or three community members at the garden.”

6.3. Building effective operation

The theme of 'building effective operation' will be examined by employing the sub-themes of: multiple motives; inclusion; social interaction; member input; creativity; planning and accountability.

6.3.1. Multiple motives

Interviewees' wide range of motivations can be categorised into those that lead to personal fulfilment while the other category comprises ideological and societal motives. Regarding the former category, interviewees cited individuals who became involved in order to: learn how to grow vegetables; realise their passion for gardening; grow organic food; and to widen their social network.

“I wanted to grow organic food without using chemicals.”

Regarding the latter category, interviewees spoke about becoming involved in community gardens to promote environmental sustainability or to promote urban composting.

“That by composting we could produce a lot very valuable products in a very small space.”

The leadership associated with the community gardens ensured members’ motives were accommodated.

6.3.2. Inclusion

According to a number of interviewees, community gardens were designed to enable people with disabilities to work in the garden. This required community gardens to allocate funding to amend their design (to ensure accessibility for those with physical disabilities), and to facilitate people with disabilities being in a position to work in their respective community garden.

“Built raised beds for people with disabilities who were wheelchair users.”

Different social groups, including individuals experiencing mental health issues, were welcomed as members of community gardens. Interviewees were mindful of including and supporting members who were experiencing personal issues, in a discreet manner. Diverse horticultural interests were accommodated through allocating space for growing vegetables, fruit and flowers. This was deemed an effective approach for attracting members.

6.3.3. Social interaction

Community gardens promoted social interaction between members through structuring specific times for members to interact with each other. The tea break was the most common way for members to interact.

“I’ve always said the most important piece of equipment is the kettle.”

Interviewees mentioned the importance of having a facility to enable people to have a cup of tea. The tea break was regarded as playing an important role in fostering a sense of community among members. It enabled new members to become more at ease with working in the community garden.

“I think the social dimension and the cultivation of a sense of community within the community is primarily important.”

The social dimension facilitated members to build trusting relationships with each other, which in turn contributed to members working more effectively together.

6.3.4. Member input

According to a number of interviewees, the amount of time invested by members in the community gardens determines what can be achieved. Interviewees spoke about the presence of a core group who were prepared to work in the garden on a weekly basis, as being a critical success factor. The core group provided continuity, leadership, and served as role models to other members.

“It was important to have a number of members who were prepared to commit amount of time per week in the garden”

The point was made that the formation of temporary groups can attract individuals who are not willing to commit long-term to the community garden, but who are nonetheless prepared to assist in the organisation of one-off events. Interviewees were conscious of members leaving after a period of time for a variety of reasons, and consequently the core members allocated time to recruiting new members. A number of interviewees expressed a concern that membership will decline as the economy improves, due to members having additional income to pursue other hobbies and lifestyle choices.

“A critical concern is whether will stay involved with the garden as the economy starts off. Will people get caught up in consuming and working as was the case in 06/07”

6.3.5. Creativity

The community garden leaders were creative in addressing obstacles they encountered. In one community garden, the core members used the foundations of demolished houses to construct a pathway which enabled wheelchair users to have access to the garden. The community garden in part of the city was comprised of multiple small community garden plots to address the lack of available space in one part of the city.

“..that’s looking at a more distributed approach to community gardening so instead of having one big community garden...”

With regard to increasing environmental awareness, one community gardening group used social events as the mechanism to promote environmental awareness, and in particular educating residents about how to compost. The same community garden has used its community garden to initiate other sustainable development initiatives. One interviewee stated that innovative ways of planning and organising need be identified to complement conventional meetings as some members do not like attending meetings.

6.3.6. Planning and accountability

Interviewees spoke about the importance of each community garden devising and adhering to a vision. Planning was considered vital to the development of community gardens. However, interviewees noted the importance of achieving a balance between planning and working.

“You know if you plan, if you over plan you’ll do nothing.”

A number of the community gardens had a governance structure in place which facilitated formal accountability and ongoing communication to its membership. A steering committee, involving staff employed by a local development company and residents, was responsible for the management of one community garden.

6.3.7. Skills

Interviewees spoke about successful community gardens having members with a range of different skills. A number of interviewees rated practical experience and expertise in growing plants as the most critical factor to the development of a successful community garden. Interviewees mentioned that experienced gardeners were given the responsibility of devising a physical plan and design for the garden. The more experienced gardeners tended to value spending time with new members with the aim of passing on their knowledge of growing plants.

“So we give them an idea that’s how a corn grows or that’s where a turnip comes from.”

In one community garden, gardeners who had become members with limited knowledge of horticulture progressed onto and completed accredited courses in horticulture. This resulted in the community garden accessing these members’ expertise in orchards. Members with promotional and media skills were deemed important for publicising what the community garden had to offer the community.

6.4. Sustainability

The theme of 'sustainability' will be examined under the sub-themes: voluntary input; grant funding; resourcefulness; and traded income.

6.4.1. Voluntary input

Interviewees valued the time members spent working in the garden as the most critical resource to attaining sustainability.

"The key resource is the time individuals are prepared to work in the community garden on a voluntary basis."

In one community, a group of local men (who worked in the construction sector) completed extensive preparatory work on an obsolete site, transforming it into space which could serve as a community garden.

6.4.2. Grant funding and membership fees

Community gardens secured grant funding from private, philanthropic, and state sources. The funding was mainly used to purchase, equipment, upgrade aspects of the gardens' infrastructure, and either construct or purchase facilities. Interviewees were mindful that funding placed constraints on its uses. One interviewee spoke about making a persuasive pitch when seeking funding from the private sector. He stated high quality videos demonstrating the community garden's impact was an important tool in this regard.

While noting the benefits of state funding, a small number of interviewees mentioned that receiving some forms of state support posed a challenge to the community garden's autonomy and maintaining its values.

"Three years ago, we had the option of securing CE programme² and co-ordinator to maintain the garden. The option was put to our members but they said that this was our community and we do not want to run by tax-payers money. They articulated a belief that would have lost their sense of community and control over the garden. The members would become visitors of the centre as opposed to running the garden. This was very encouraging."

6.4.3. Resourcefulness

Interviewees cited pragmatic and ideological motives for striving to be resourceful. With regard to the former, interviewees mentioned that the creative use of resources reduces the level of funding required to maintain the garden. This allows membership fees to be kept at a minimum, which makes the garden more accessible to individuals who live on low incomes. It was the experience of one interviewee that when a community garden gains a reputation for being resourceful, this leads to the local community donating equipment.

"We also find that people have donated items, gardens items to us you that they no longer need, we got a neighbour who gave us a tumbler composter and a wormery..."

² Community Employment is an employment programme which helps long-term unemployed people to re-enter the active workforce by breaking their experience of unemployment through a return to work routine. The programme assists them to enhance and develop both their technical and personal skills which can then be used in the workplace.

Regarding the latter set of motives, interviewees asserted that being resourceful was consistent with the ethos of community gardens. Interviewees spoke of community gardens being areas for promoting environmental sustainability.

“...you have to be very resourceful but again that’s part of a sustainability reusing thing.”

Interviewees spoke of re-use of discarded materials which contributed to community self-reliance. They stated that being resourceful through the re-use of material provides an opportunity to harness membership’s skills and to enable members to hone newly acquired skills.

6.4.4. Traded income

Some community gardens generated income from the sale of harvested produce from their gardens. Traded income generated varying proportions of community gardens’ total income required to cover operational costs. For example, interviewees detailed a number of sources of generating income to cover operational costs, including: membership fees; sponsorship; donations from attending social events; and conventional fundraising activities. One community garden covered its operational costs from donations and grant funding.

6.5. Intrinsic values

The theme of ‘intrinsic values’ will be examined under the sub-themes: voluntary input; valuing diversity; community solidarity; commitment to organic gardening; promoting access; and contributing to bio-diversity.

6.5.1. Valuing diversity

Members of community gardens welcomed groups of adults with intellectual disabilities and autistic children. Interviewees spoke of their community gardens being a forum for fostering inter-culturalism.

“... a lot of different cultures coming in to, from Poland, we have, we’ve a couple of students from come in they are Polish and then we have a couple of Romanian nurses...”

Interviewees believed that their community gardens assisted residents from different cultures making new friends in their neighbourhood.

6.5.2. Community solidarity

Interviewees spoke of their commitment to facilitating different social groups to gain access to the community garden. A number of the interviewees mentioned their commitment to providing school children with the opportunity to learn how to grow plants and to gain an appreciation of nature. One of the community gardens provided local young people with the opportunity to gain practical horticultural experience which was a prerequisite to gaining a national qualification in horticulture. Two gardens provided adults with intellectual disabilities and their carers the opportunity to grow vegetables in their gardens.

6.5.3. Commitment to organic gardening

Interviewees believed in organic gardening because of the health benefits that accrue to individuals who eat organic produce, as well as the benign impact of such produce on the local environment.

6.5.4. Promoting access

Interviewees spoke of the commitment their respective community gardens has to have open membership. Evidence of this commitment can be gleaned from the low or no membership fees.

“No membership fees. We apply for grants from different organisations and they are glad to donate...”

6.5.5. Urban sanctuary for biodiversity

One of the aims of the community gardens is to provide an urban environment for biodiversity. Two of the community gardens are engaged in bee keeping.

6.6. Stakeholder engagement

6.6.1. Community links

The governance structures of the community gardens prioritise awareness-raising and promotion of their community gardens. These activities have the twin aims of recruiting new members, and gaining allies to assist in preventing vandalism. With regard to building awareness in their respective communities, promotional drives are initiated on a regular basis via the local media, social media, and through targeting community organisations such as active retirement groups. A number of interviewees mentioned the importance of fostering good relationships with residents living beside the community garden. These residents would inform garden leaders of any suspicious activities that may be taking place in the surrounding areas of the garden.

“To have good relations with your immediate neighbours and like we know some people who live quite close and they do keep an eye out for the garden and do have my number and X’s number if something, if they notice suspicious they and that is such an important asset to have really you know.”

One garden has initiated a tree sponsorship scheme which creates links between the community garden and the wider community. The point was made that community gardens need to be embedded in the community to be a success. According to a number of interviewees, for this to become a reality requires the leaders to live in the community where the garden is located. A small number of interviewees noted community gardens are not successful when initiated by individuals who have no connection with the community.

“I think a lot of it is around trying to justify their own value in the city but it just doesn’t work you know you can’t, I’ve seen so many projects so many projects fail because they they’ve been initiated by the council or by a community development officer and then once they walk away the thing just.”

6.6.2. Local authority

The interviewees overwhelmingly spoke about the relationship with their local authority as being critical to community gardens remaining open. Interviewees mentioned the importance of adhering to the conditions set out in the licence agreement with their local authority. There seemed to be a variation in the duration of the licence agreements with some groups being given a one year license while others were afforded longer-term occupancy. One interviewee suggested that local authorities should adopt international best practice of resourcing workers to support communities endeavouring to establish community gardens.

6.6.3. Funders

Prior to submitting grant applications, some interviewees spoke of finding out background information on the funding organisation. Interviewees stated the importance of providing evidence of the community garden’s impact.

6.7. Future challenges

The theme of 'future challenges' will be examined using the sub-themes: succession; access to land; and local authorities.

6.7.1. Succession

Interviewees repeatedly spoke of the challenges garden leaders are encountering in developing a succession plan to ensure that a new leadership takes over the management of community gardens in the decades to come. Individualism in Irish society was one challenge. A concern was expressed that as the economy improves, members will have less time to spend in undertaking tasks associated with managing a community garden.

"It is critical to have a succession so that it does not finish up relying on two or three people."

Another societal challenge noted was that Irish adults are increasingly leading passive lifestyles. One interviewee referred to the difficulty in getting one person to take over managing the community garden

"It's been really difficult to get somebody to take that over.."

According to a number of individuals, the challenge of leadership succession will be mitigated if community gardens became more appealing to young people. Interviewees also spoke about the challenge of retaining current levels of membership as the economy improves.

6.7.2. Access to land

Communities can spend a number of years endeavouring to secure land for a community garden. One interviewee stated that there needed to be a mechanism in place within each local authority for allocating land to community groups. If this was in place, communities could secure land more quickly.

6.7.3. Local authorities

Although interviewees spoke about the pivotal role of local authorities in the establishment of community gardens, the point was made that local authorities tend to impose environmental initiatives on communities.

6.8. Impact

Community gardens impact on the lives of individual members and on the communities in which they are located.

6.8.1. Individual impacts

Interviewees cited the following impacts: strengthening members' mental health; increasing awareness of food provenance; and improving members' physical fitness.

6.8.2. Community impacts

Community gardens can have a positive impact on the communities in which they are located. They can lead to greater social interaction between residents. They provide a forum for new initiatives to be identified. They can lead to environmental advocacy initiatives being started.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Individuals have a range of motives for becoming involved in community gardens (Guitart, 2012). One of the responsibilities of the garden leaders is to ensure that individual members' motives are fulfilled while working on a voluntary basis. This requires garden leaders to possess mediation skills. The existence of a core group of gardeners is vital to ensure that a shared vision for each community garden is agreed, there is a programme of work, and that members feel included.

Urban communities striving to develop sustainable development initiatives, particularly those in socio-economically marginalised communities, encounter a greater number of complex issues than rural communities (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004). Pringle's (2015) theoretical framework focuses on the capacities required for the successful implementation of community energy projects (a form of sustainable development initiative) in rural settings. Although this is a robust framework, when applied to rural communities it requires some modification to detail the capacities required to successfully implement urban community gardens. With regard to individual capacity, urban communities, particularly marginalised communities, tend to have a smaller cohort of individuals with the skills, knowledge and values to initiate and maintain community gardens. This could have repercussions for the amount of time these individuals need to invest to ensure that the initiative becomes operational. Community leaders could become over-committed which could lead to personal repercussions, due to their enthusiasm (Seyfang, 2007). Therefore the framework could be adjusted to specify the importance of empowering novice members, and possibly securing external independent supports. With regard to social capital, some communities, particularly socio-economically marginalised neighbourhoods, may not have the knowledge about how to engage with the local government system, in order to secure both land and other resources to establish a community garden.

With regard to infrastructural capacities, with the demand for land being higher in urban than in rural settings, the framework needs to take account of the challenges in securing land. In relation to cultural capacity, many urban communities would not have a history of developing sustainable development initiatives, and therefore values associated should be broadened to include those that focus on community solidarity, as these values arose in urban community gardens and were important in their development.

The research findings indicate that community gardens in urban settings encounter a number of challenges, including the absence of a mechanism for community groups to access land. An independent support structure could assist urban communities to develop community gardens and indeed other forms of sustainable development initiatives.

Environmental, health, and social motives for forming a community garden were articulated. However, food poverty was only mentioned by one interviewee as a motive for that person becoming involved in the establishment of community garden. In an epoch where there are number of food bank initiatives in Dublin established to address food poverty, it may be timely to undertake research into the potential of community urban agriculture to address food poverty in areas of Dublin experiencing poverty.

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Appendix

Core questions used in interviews

1. How did the concept of a community garden in your locality come about?
2. What were the motivating factors for individuals to develop a community garden?
3. What is the primary focus of the community garden? (social, economic, education regarding environment)
4. What were the essential skills/expertise required to transform the community garden from a concept to growing food?
5. What were the resources required to establish the community garden?
6. Did you require resources and supports from outside your community?
7. What were the challenges encountered in establishing the community garden? How were these overcome?
8. Has the community developed a formal organisational structure? What is the criteria for membership?