

## **The Role of Networking, Innovation and Creativity in Social Responsibility to Connect Urban and Rural Environment**

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### ***Abstract***

*In the changing world, urbanized areas and their growing population show us emerging necessity of the improvement of their social responsibility. Reaching towards this kind of civic responsibility may be carried out through the increase of networking, innovation and creativity support in the spatial planning theories and practise at the local level. Various bottom-up movements and participatory tools for engaging local people into the neighbourhood community life might help improve diversity and strengthen social responsibility of communities and individuals. This paper aims to discuss the potential of using social capital of local communities, which is inherently connected to the space and its quality, to foster local sustainability.*

*Social capital may be expressed also by the presence and activity of different groups and individuals, including those called “urban gardeners”. Urban gardeners (or farmers) are focused on local production of food, largely for local consumption. This contribution is based on the knowledge on guerilla urbanism, community gardening, food production concepts in the urban areas and recent research of Andres Duany on agrarian urbanism. According to Duany, agrarian urbanism opens up the whole new perspectives on the role of community and considers the potential to shift leisure time activities into the commitment to the local sustainability. However, this study also attempts to extend prior research on agrarian urbanism by examining possible innovative ways of using vacant and underused spaces, such as brownfields, for the implementation of the “agrarian urbanism concept” into the planning practice.*

### **1. Introduction**

Community gardening became a popular leisure time activity in the cities around the world. Participation in urban community gardening gives participants a full-fledged alternative experience in food production, even with limited time and space conditions. American Community Gardening Association defines community gardens as any piece of land, which is collectively gardened by a group of people. According to various studies and researches, community gardening provides not only experience in food production, but has also numerous positive health, social and environmental effects. Potentially, community gardening could also affect the way communities think and perceive food, environment and health (Frumkin 2005, Conradson 2005, Hale et al. 2011). As Michael Pollan argues, food production of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must change. Technologies such as food preservation, transportation and arching over seasonal and regional food production modified the relationship between food, culture and society (Pollan 2011). Community gardens are often viewed as one of the strategies, which may improve sustainability of urban environment as well as improve health and affect lifestyle of individuals. More than half of world’s populations lives in cities, which opens up a new perspective, particularly on involving society – communities, on food production in urbanized areas. Andres Duany’s concept of agrarian urbanism is one of the most beneficial methods to develop and dwell on land. Rather than agricultural, agrarian urbanism involves society into food production

and processing (Duany, 2011). This paper aims to discuss the possibility of implementation of larger-scale community gardening in the capital of Slovakia, Bratislava, with perspective of future transformation towards agrarian urbanism. Bratislava has different relicted areas, underused buildings, unused land or building gaps, which are potentially suitable for implementation of such strategy. These may become a component of urban food system in the form of community gardens.

## **2. Health and social aspects of community gardening**

Social cohesion and informal social control are two major preconditions of collective efficacy. The result of solidarity, mutual trust between community members leads to the environment, where individuals are able to take action and follow the same goals together. (Sampson, et.al., 1997; Teig et al. 2009; Jacobs, 1961) We assume that community gardening may play significant community-defining role, if supported and applied widely in cities. Community gardens support social inclusion and positive social and psychological effects, which lead to healthier society (Hale et al. 2011). Moreover, community garden researches show increase of collective efficacy, neighbourhood attachment, and strengthened sense of safety. They also foster environmental knowledge, connect people and create emotional connections to the garden. At the local level, community gardens and the gardener experience provides a great opportunity to connect sustainable and productive landscape within the urban food environment (Hale et al. 2011; Teig et al. 2009).

Community gardens support local sustainability of cities and improve health of their residents. Apart from their race, age, ethnicity, social status or income, gardening supports diversity within local communities and also within greater national, or multinational movement of community gardeners. This social movement is a part of sustainable food production, which reaches also to people outside this community. Community gardeners also influence local and national policies, mainly in supporting healthy and active lifestyle and use of vacant spaces (Teig et al. 2009; Hyens, 1996; Armstrong 2000). Healthy and sustainable landscapes, to which belong also community gardens, constitute of the relationship between physical and social structures. Biological and environmental factors are meant by physical structures as well as manmade objects are meant by social structures, e.g. political, economic or cultural factors. Connecting food, environments and health through emotional, spiritual and value-driven experience is a challenge for designing places that connect individuals and shape communities (Cummins, et al. 2007; Hale et al. 2011). For planning and supporting sustainable cities it could be crucial to plan urban gardens for community activities based on these experiences.

Donna Armstrong's survey of 63 community gardens grouped under twenty community garden programs in upstate New York resulted in the description of numerous benefits of gardening:

- Improved social connections, raising awareness and activity of local policy
- Interactions between gardeners' groups through different programs
- Identification of children with cultivated land
- Participation also of lower income households
- Stronger community cohesion – recognition of people on the streets
- Higher knowledge about local actors – easier action initiation process
- Social control of the neighbourhood
- Landscaping attempts not only on the community garden
- Establishment of neighbourhood organizations
- Establishment and maintenance of parks and playgrounds (Armstrong 2000)

## **3. Urban and environmental aspects of community gardening**

Community gardens are usually defined as any piece of land gardened by a group of people in different locations. Community gardens are very flexible and adaptable to different conditions. From spatial planning point of view community gardens can be classified by different criteria, such as location, area, connection to public/ private objects, ownership, and type of production:

- Location: urban, suburban, rural settlement
- Area: individual plots, mid-sized communal plot, large plot for urban agriculture

- Connection to objects: kindergartens, schools, hospitals, community centres, churches etc.
  - Access: opened, semi-public, semi-private, private
  - Ownership: public, private, unknown
  - Type of production: ecological, permaculture, limited use of chemical fertilizers
  - Production for: individual consumption, community, youth, local farmers' market
  - Support received: city, community budget, none etc.
- (Kaplan, et al. 2005)

Community gardens often create an environmentally sustainable alternative to the conventional rural agriculture. Gardeners grow flowers, fruits, vegetables and herbs to connect back to the nature and enjoy gardening as relaxing leisure-time activity (Kaplan, et al. 2005; Teig et al. 2009).

#### **4. Challenges and perspectives of community gardening in Slovakia**

According to Michel Pollan, it is necessary for our food production process to change, and this change should be made by our communities. Gardening communities might become an important part of the shift towards sustainable local food production.

Local food conditions are strongly affected by the way food is produced, transported to the shops/markets and finally distributed to the consumers. Community gardens may serve as one such landscape and are especially relevant in urban settings where residents, especially children, often lack experience with the fundamental processes associated with growing food (local farms, gardens). They are also connected with the lack of opportunities to purchase food from alternative, healthier and more personal, sustainable sources (farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, small-scale grocery venues, food cooperatives) (Brown et al. 2000)

Challenges and perspectives in Slovakia:

- Limited research done yet (mapping of vacant spaces)
- Number of vacant/ unused plots in cities
- Brownfields as potential space
- First successful examples: community garden Sasinkova, Bratislava – Old Town, community vine yard and garden Pionierska, Bratislava – Nové Mesto
- Missing complex strategy for public spaces and legal support
- Missing support instruments for attracting gardeners (passportisation of available plots, clear rules,
- Promotion for land owners – usual fear of something new (gardeners will “stay forever”, fear of plot degradation, administrative difficulties...)
- Transition of our cities
- And many others.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Urban environment can have positive effects on creation and growth of communities as they have the opportunity to build a local identity and a sense of localism around a certain space. Community gardens can have a huge impact on this process as well as on the quality of urban life beginning from producing fresh food to strengthening neighbourhood bonds. It can also have positive impacts on distressed neighbourhoods where vacant lots can be converted into community gardens or community green spaces and these improvements can have an effect on residents' perception of safety outdoors, reduction of social problems and cultivation of social responsibility.

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