

Participatory development and the sustainable city: community forestry in Detroit

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Abstract

The Urban Resources Initiative (URI/DETROIT) was a pilot application of participatory development strategies to address environmental, economic and social problems in Detroit. Deindustrialization and related forces have generated approximately 93.2 square kilometers of vacant land within Detroit. Often targeted for illegal waste dumping, the resulting health and safety problems are cited among residents' most pressing concerns (Fitzgerald [1]). URI/DETROIT worked in partnership with community-based organizations to transform some of these sites into important local resources. Members of the participating organizations identified local needs, interests, skills, resources and goals and designed appropriate forestry-based projects for their communities. Through these efforts, once dangerous lots have become community tree nurseries, agroforestry gardens and orchards. In turn, the community objectives served as criteria for assessing organizational empowerment, defined by Saegert and Winkel [2] as the ability to achieve collectively determined improvements in community conditions.

Participants reported success in addressing environmental concerns, including aesthetic and safety objectives. Most projects had not yet produced direct economic benefits. However, one group reported a dramatic improvement in property values which they attributed to their community orchard, and most did recoup maintenance expenses. Groups also reported increased participation among under-represented groups, improved strategic planning skills and dissemination of leadership skills across a larger core membership. The results indicate that a wider

range of objectives could be addressed through participatory development strategies than are typically addressed by conventional development strategies and illustrate the promise of democratic approaches for sustainable urban development.

1 Introduction

Most urban development initiatives rely on large scale, technocratic approaches which give little consideration to local needs or preferences. This tendency undermines the success of those efforts (Weinberg, Pellow & Schnaiberg [3]) and increases costs through over-reliance on professionals. Urban and natural resource planning can be particularly technocratic in the United States where the current research took place. Professional-driven approaches are often rationalized based on the presumed inability of local residents to participate effectively. Development practitioners may presume that urban residents are especially unprepared to participate in environmental concerns (Cole [4]). While conventional approaches to development in these settings have generated tremendous economic growth assessed at the national or even metropolitan levels, they have often contributed to the decline of urban centers on a parallel scale. Thus, these initiatives are often environmentally, economically and socially unsustainable.

Solutions have often followed similar approaches. In hopes of stimulating economic redevelopment, for example, brownfield initiatives limit liability for contamination and allow moderated clean-up standards (Kibel [5], Volokh [6], Buente & Crough [7], Vig and Kraft [8]). However, Bullard [9] documented that the presence of toxic sites discourages less-polluting enterprises from locating to these areas. They produce few jobs, only a small number of which go to local residents. Those that do are often low-wage with few benefits and little chance for advancement [10]. Thus, these and other urban redevelopment policies have seldom addressed the most pressing needs of urban communities.

1.1 Detroit: the current case

Detroit has long symbolized the United State's industrial capacity. Over the past four decades, however, large areas of the city have suffered disinvestment and virtual abandonment. Deindustrialization and depopulation have created more than 70,000 vacant lots within the city; equivalent to 93.2 square kilometers or about one fifth of the city's entire land area [11]. While white workers frequently relocated in pursuit of jobs, discriminatory housing practices frequently left Blacks no such options (Boggs [12], Sugrue [13], Darden, Child Hill, Thomas, & Thomas [14], Vose [15]), leaving the city one of the most segregated in the nation (Massey & Denton [16]). Like many U.S. cities, Detroit has turned to stadiums, casinos, brownfields, and empowerment zones to rebuild its economic base. Despite assurances to the contrary, however, benefits of these approaches seldom accrue to local residents and small businesses [17].

Many Detroit residents have adapted to their changed circumstances through a commitment to replace the city's once-booming industrial economy with one

based on mutual reliance and economic independence; one more consistent with the principles of sustainable community development [18]. This move toward localized development in a major industrial center illustrates the possibility that development is not linear and irreversible as once presumed (Rostow [19], So [20]). In this case, professionals must also adapt by recognizing the importance of supporting grassroots efforts to develop capacity to meet local needs. The Urban Resources Initiative (URI/DETROIT) explored the utility of partnership-based approaches in addressing such needs.

1.2 Participatory development

In the search for solutions to the challenges facing the city, URI/DETROIT looked to the South for lessons on participatory alternatives. One promising approach was social forestry. Social foresters work in partnership with residents to identify socially, and environmentally appropriate solutions to local concerns. The process is community-driven, decision-making is shared and power is distributed equitably across the groups (McDonough, Vachta, Funkhouser & Gieche, [21], Cernea [22], Ismawan, Folla, Marbyanto, & Haryadi [23]).

2 Methods: collaborative planning and evaluation

Participatory action research methods used to reinforce the community-driven approach. Research processes were designed to build strategic planning and organizational development skills consistent with empowerment evaluation [24]. The program followed several overlapping phases: collective determination of project objectives and assessment criteria; planning and design; and a multi-level, multi-method evaluation. Through these processes, four community tree/shrub nurseries, two agroforestry-based community gardens, two parks with environmental education and gardening components, one orchard and one 'natural fence' protecting a community garden and play lot were designed and planted. A number of groups generated multiple purpose designs.

2.1 Evaluation

The evaluation component included of two processes. First, achievement of group objectives was assessed quarterly through group interviews during regularly group meetings. Members reviewed project objectives and evaluated how well each had been achieved to date. Unintended consequences, access to technical assistance, organizational changes and networking were also assessed.

The second process explored organizational capacity building and development outcomes through individual surveys and focus group discussions. Groups joining the URI/DETROIT program after the procedures were designed completed this process as part of their regular evaluation activities. However, because this component was developed after the first three projects were planted, members of those groups were asked to participate in one "long term" follow up meeting. In either case,

the purpose of the focus groups were explained during a regular group meeting and all members were invited to participate. Those who were involved in earlier phases of the project were contacted directly. A written questionnaire and informed consent materials were mailed to all participants. Responses to the questionnaires were aggregated and used to guide focus group discussions about the implications of participating in the URI program for the organization and the broader community.

3 Results

Participation in the quarterly group interviews is illustrated in Table 1. Similarly, Table 2 illustrates the number of individuals completing mail surveys and involvement in focus group discussions. Two groups did not hold focus groups and another was completed only by the president because the group was on a temporary hiatus.

Table 1: Number of participant groups completing quarterly assessments

Group	Data Point (months following planting)				# data points completed
	3	6	9	12	
1		x	x		2
2	x	x	x	x	4
3	x	x	x		3
4	x	x	x		3
5	x	x	x	x	4
6	x	x	x	x	4
7	x	x	x	x	4

Table 2: Participation in bi-annual evaluation process

Group	Time 1 (T1) Mail	T1 Focus Group	Time 2 (T2) Mail	T2 Focus Group	Sub-Total Mail	Sub-Total Focus Groups	Total
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
4	0	0	4	5	4	5	9
5	4	11	1	1	5	12	17
6	5	5	5	1	10	6	16
7	4	6	6	6	10	12	22
Sub-Total	13	22	16	14	30	35	
Total		T1 = 35		T2 = 30			65

During the evaluation process, individuals were asked what resources their group would need to become the 'ideal' community organization. Responses are presented in Table 3. A few participants citing 'money' as a critical need is notable given the economic conditions in these neighborhoods. On the contrary, building organizational capacity – including increasing membership core membership and skills – represents a much more commonly cited concern.

Table 3: Resources needed to become 'ideal' community organization

Resource	% of respondents
Information	22
Physical resources	13
Labor	12
Membership	12
Skills	12
Money	9
Time	7
Core members	7
Equipment	4
Other contributions	2

It is interesting to compare those responses to the community-identified objectives for the URI projects presented in Figure 1. Economic objectives were more common than one might expect given the previous responses. Most groups, however, did focus on improving organizational development and social conditions as well as improving environmental quality by addressing aesthetic and safety concerns.

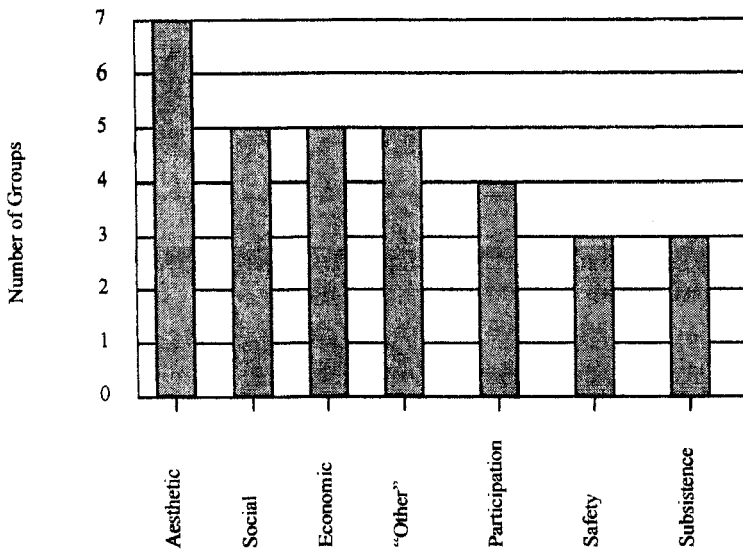


Figure 1: Number of groups identifying each objective category

During each of the four quarterly group interviews, participants were asked to rate project-related changes in local conditions on a one to four scale, where 1 representing "no improvement whatsoever" and 4 "complete fulfillment of the objective". As illustrated in Table 4, improvements over time were reported on all categories with two exceptions. Most groups citing economic objectives had not begun selling the plants by the end of the evaluation process. Similarly, those with subsistence interests typically focused their initial efforts on establishing the trees and shrubs and had not, as yet, developed the vegetable gardens in their projects.

Table 4: Achievement of group objectives

<u>Objective</u>	<u>Data point</u>	<u>Mean response</u>	<u>Objective</u>	<u>Data point</u>	<u>Mean response</u>
Participation	3 months	3.00	Social	3 months	1.50
	6 months	2.00		6 months	3.00
	9 months	3.00		9 months	3.00
	12 months	4.00		12 months	2.50
Aesthetic	3 months	3.17	Safety	3 months	2.00
	6 months	2.80		6 months	2.00
	9 months	3.00		9 months	2.50
	12 months	3.50		12 months	3.50
Subsistence	3 months	1.00	Economic	3 months	1.00
	6 months	1.00		6 months	1.00
	9 months	2.00		9 months	2.00
	12 months	1.33		12 months	1.00

Thus, subsistence and economic goals, those most consistent with conventional development activities, were least likely to have been achieved through the URI/DETROIT project within the evaluation period. On a more heartening note, aesthetic and safety objectives, those most closely related to environmental conditions, were almost fully achieved. As reported by one participant in a focus group discussion, these successes may have translated into indirect economic benefits as well,

... With the trees, with the painting of the trees and the curbs and even with our fruit trees, in this neighborhood, the property values have just about doubled, I found that out today, the house next door here, two years ago it was on the market for \$10,000. It's for \$32,000 now ...

The ability to address economic objectives more indirectly while building local capacity was cited as a vital but unusual contribution to helping urban communities address pressing local problems by the president of one neighborhood association who said,

The question for groups that are trying to work with inner city neighborhood groups is what's more important? Selling the trees to recoup some of the cost, which is a valid thing. Or does it make more sense to have a group that has the financial ability to contribute that part, the cost of the actual trees and bushes, in order to keep the cost minimal in order to get the job done? That's the hardest part of it, getting the job done ... this is something I do and I really appreciate about your program is that it seems geared toward solving the kinds of problems that we have that nobody else will.

Awareness of local conditions was cited as critical to addressing development concerns by one participant who said,

You need to have knowledge and control over vacant properties and buildings... knowledge of land use, what's around you, use of land in and around the neighborhood and of other information that affects the area ...

Another felt that her group gained such knowledge through their involvement with the URI/DETROIT program and anticipated both ecological and economic improvements as a result,

[the program] has increased our knowledge about trees and shrubs, about different types of plants and a greater sensitivity toward our environment. An awareness of what kinds of shrubs do people like and use, what has economic potential in our neighborhood

Thus participants in the program recognized the relationship between environmental and economic conditions and felt that the projects provided an opportunity to directly address those interrelated concerns directly. One neighborhood association illustrated this recognition through their mission statement:

to revitalize the community spiritually, economically, physically and socially so that everyone would have a safe and clean environment in which to live and grow. To encourage residents to contribute their time, talents and resources to the betterment of their community so that all residents and visitors can feel welcome and comfortable ...

Demonstrating a similar concern for the larger community, some groups hoped the benefits would expand to surrounding neighborhoods.

Plus we thought like it would encourage others, you know, coming through seeing what we've done with vacant lots, because we have so many vacant lots in our neighborhood, that that would impress them or entice them to do the same and even enticing them, that it would encourage the program itself to continue. So, it was developing in something positive.

The greatest impact of the URI program may lie in the achievement of participation goals which may lay the groundwork for addressing other concerns through improved civic engagement, organizational capacity and strategic planning. One participant reflected on this potential by noting,

This discussion and the last one has helped us to think through – it's almost like that, in the long term, may be of more help than the trees themselves. I don't know of any other organization that goes to local groups and, over the course of a year or two, helps them to think through their growth and difficulties – I appreciate that.

Most of the groups reported active participation in planting day activities among residents who were not members of their organization, including one who said,

Well ... you had everybody participating, like I say, you had like 90% participation rate, when we did this, it brought everybody out... I was real proud of them.

Although they were often active in planting, however, retaining younger members represented a particular challenge. As one participant explained,

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...they don't think they're going to be here for very long. It's not until they get to be my age that they decide maybe they should get involved in the community and then they can't do anything!

Many of the groups hoped the environmental and recreational aspects of the projects would appear to younger residents. However, several had difficulties recruiting volunteers for ongoing maintenance activities including one who reported,

if we'da had just about five people to cut those lots, just five, it would be a breeze, there wouldn't be nothing to it, but we didn't have five people that would help out ...

Most groups reported that the program did contribute to facilitate organizational development, including one who credited the continuity of project-related activities for maintaining group cohesion during difficult times.

My honest opinion is that this program has helped keep our organization together, we have undergone a transition in leadership and leadership styles ... but the focus on the lot and the nursery has created an issue around which we can focus or really to stay focused on our objectives and goals.

Conclusion

The pilot scale of the URI/DETROIT program limits the generalizations that can be derived, however some useful observations can be drawn from the current study. First, participants identified meaningful and achievable objectives which were broader and more innovative than would be typical of conventional urban forestry activities. Yet, they were often consistent with the scholarly literature in organizational development and community participation, challenging common assumptions among professionals regarding the limitations of indigenous knowledge.

Second, participants met a number of these objectives through URI/DETROIT project activities. Where they fell short, lessons can be drawn from the current case to improve the potential for local partners for achieving local objectives in future efforts. For example, expanded training, technical assistance networking and identification of funding sources for project maintenance could enhance the likelihood of meeting the full range of identified objectives. The effort to maintain a strictly community-driven approach may have impeded delivery of some of these resources in the current case activities. During a final focus group meeting, for example, one teen-aged participant suggested that environmental education programming may have fostered recruitment of younger residents. However, the opportunity to use this readily available resource to meet a commonly identified challenge was missed because it had not been suggested during the planning process and program staff responded to group-identified objectives.

In spite of some shortcomings, participants in the URI/DETROIT program ultimately reported that they had achieved many of their objectives and, that their organizations were stronger and better able to achieve their future objectives as a

result of their participation. Finding a better balance of community and professional initiative while maintaining a community-centered decision making process may resolve some of the difficulties encountered by URI/DETROIT participants and contribute further to the development of a sustainable city. Ultimately, insight regarding this balance represents the most critical lesson of URI/DETROIT for those interested in sustainable urban development. For instance, the evidence based on the success of the URI participant groups indicates that citizen groups can define their own goals and work with professionals to realize that vision were local government open to and supportive of participatory strategies. These approaches could not only lead to more sustainable development, but may be more cost effective for resource-limited urban governments. Such a shift in ideology would require a longer vision and more holistic vision. However, support for community initiatives toward self-reliance and local development will become increasingly important as globalization persists and resources to address localized conditions become ever more scarce.

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