

Dreaming the BIO-DREAM?

Community gardening and the role of social-cultural work

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1. Introduction

As a team of socio-cultural workers and educators in Flanders (Antwerp) we try to pick up significant interventions that evolve around us, especially those involving local communities and sharing activities. One of our points of interest arose visiting a community garden at the Left Bank Neighborhood in Antwerp. What seemed to be a meeting point for ecological gardeners became a reception area for an exhibition and later on a concert place and a restaurant! For a moment people were part of a local community, simply because they were there. **Is it that simple?**

Building and supporting communities is a main focus in our education. Initiatives as ‘The BIO-DREAM-project’ tickle us to find out more about the role of this kind of community gardens, regarding the professional role of a social-cultural worker. It also gives us a more in depth understanding of the needs of people and helps us defining our dynamic role in the city or society.

In this paper we search for the different types of ‘community gardens’ and their value for people and society. We then focus on the Antwerp situation and introduce the BIODREAM-project as a specific case. We present the results of a small research project on this case and formulate questions for future research. After setting out these lines, we focus on the role of social-cultural work, as we define it in Flanders, regarding community gardening.

2. Community gardens: what’s in a name?

Currently, towns and cities across Europe experience a significant increase of different types of community gardening projects. Although ‘gardening’ is one of the main focuses in these projects, several types can be distinguished depending on the importance of the collective action, the individual benefit, the focus on gardening and or other activities.

Community organized vegetable gardens

To define a first type of ‘community garden’ we need to go back to the nineteenth century. In the shadow of the industrialization wave in the beginning of that century, people were trying to hold on to an independent way of growing their own food, and having a small garden could provide that. This led to the arise of community organized vegetable gardens. It compensated the feeling of detachment amongst rural residents and improved the living conditions (Allaert, Leinfelder & Verhoestraete, 2007). The focus here lies on the individual improvement of the living conditions of people, the economic benefit. At the same time it was close to the culture of labor workers (working with their hands). The community aspect of the garden was not a prior aim but rather a side effect.

This type of gardens can be defined by the following specifications:

- A community organized vegetable garden is not part of the property of the user
- A community organized vegetable garden always comes in groups, it is not a solitary piece of land that someone uses to grow vegetables on
- It is used for growing fruits and vegetables or to sit and relax in
- There is no economical benefit for the user, growing vegetables is only for private use
- The gardens are mostly run by local non-profit organizations or governments (Allaert et al., 2007)

In Flanders, the northern part of Belgium with a population over 6 million people, there are approximately 4.600 community organized vegetable gardens divided over 114 garden parks. Half of them are situated in Antwerp, mostly in the suburban areas. Half of the users are retired men and in the cities migrants form a big target group for these kinds of gardens.

Community organized gardens have significant *value* for people and society. Economically they can be considered as a rather cheap way to design useful public areas. From a social-economical point of view it's a good correction instrument. People can be self-sufficient and therefore less influenced by economic fluctuations. Of course there is an ecological value as well. The design of vegetable garden parks can have a big ecological advantage. In Flanders though, most parks do not meet these terms. The mere fact that the gardens shorten the food

chain and can be seen as a way of city agriculture is a more valid ecological aspect in this case (Allaert et al., 2007).

Finally the social aspects of these types of gardens are remarkable. People from different ethnic and social economic background can participate and the daily interactions between gardeners form a strong social motivator. Compared with the historical background of these types of garden projects, that is a rather new evolution.

Although these community organized vegetable gardens enhance social and economical wellbeing, recent studies on these types of gardening projects, show that in Flanders there is a need for innovation and rebuilding the projects. New forms of community gardens emerge, with a stronger emphasis on ecology, urban planning and collective action.

Community gardens

A place for (ecological) gardening, a project to empower the neighborhood, a meeting point for art and nature, just a place to meet people, an opportunity to take up a role as citizen, a way to bring nature into the city, an element of citymarketing...?

When we move away from the individual focus of a gardening project, as described before, we see a new type of projects emerging, with a stronger focus on the community. People work together in a garden and work out systems to organize that in a commonly supported way. The starting point is not an individual piece of land and people do not work for their own benefit when they join in to help out. The community work comes first and the benefits are for everyone.

In Flanders the Organization for Ecological living and gardening 'VELT' introduced the concept 'Gardening Together' after years of experience with different types of community gardens. As a sociocultural movement they try to understand and promote the concept and its relationship to sociocultural work.

The reason for success has his origin in some sociological trends. A first factor in that success is the *individualization* of society. There is a strong emphasis on responsibility and making your own choices and the engagement in an organization is not life long. On the other hand people are looking for solidarity and rebuilding communities. People are in search of activities that shape and form their identity. New, rather *informal and accessible* practices tend to attract a lot of people. People move away from formal organizational structures. Within those informal networks people like to work together on a basis of '*cocreation*'. The *local* environment and the direct influence of the neighborhood people live in, is a strong motivator to join in local projects. A last trend that possibly explains the success of 'Gardening Together' projects is the fact that people are concerned about their environment, food production and the use of public space. There is a strong *ecological awareness* and a big interest in sustainability and transition (Velt, 2013a).

A 'Gardening Together' project has an ecological focus and for VELT, it is literally a garden where people work together in the creation of an ecological garden. A project realizes two specific aims: creating an ecological system and bringing people together. The social cohesion is enhanced by the diversity of people that can participate, by the process where people make arrangements on how to work together and by the informal learning processes concerning ecological/organic gardening. Antwerp has 18 different community gardens throughout the city.

Many researchers looked in to the different effects of community gardening and the *values* that can be derived are significant.

In their study on the impact of community gardening on vegetable intake, food security and family relationships, Carney et al. (2011) concluded that community gardening programs can reduce food insecurity, improve vegetable intake and strengthen family relations. The project also promoted organic gardening and motivates people (not only participants) to have an organic garden of their own.

There seems to be a democratic effect as well. Glover et al. (2005) emphasize the role of community gardening in the process of building citizenship. Active and involved participation in voluntary associations contributes indirectly to the formation of democratic citizenship and social capital. Since cooperation is a necessary component of the project, people learn to share

resources and make social connections. Above all it is a collective project and decisions are consensus based. Communication and dialogue are fundamental, but this is often the result of a (learning) process. These socialization leads to a sense of interconnectedness. Community gardens can be considered mediums through which democratic values are practiced and reproduced (Glover, Shinew & Parry, 2005; Dossogne, 2009)

Community gardens are thought to generate social benefits such as social capital. Wakefield et.al pointed out that participation in gardens elicited pride and provided a positive place for social interaction and sharing (Wakefield et.al cited in Alaimo et.al, 2010). A community garden can also improve attitudes towards the neighborhood (Armstrong 2000; Dossogne, 2009; Penet, Paganeli, et al, 2003). Alaimo et al. (2010) studied the benefits and limitations of community gardens and the results suggested that gardening activities created opportunities for the development of bonding and bridging. A salient finding was the facilitating role neighborhood organizations played, ensuring that collective action on community gardens led to increased social capital. In a more recent study they emphasize that social capital is likely built neighbor to neighbor through investments that individuals make in spending time with their neighbors and improving their neighborhood. To influence social capital, the best approach may be to encourage neighbors to create and participate in neighborhood organizations in addition to gardening.

Community gardens seem above all a 'linking activity': between leisure and work, between the individual person and the community, between the urban areas and nature, between cultural and ecological factors (Penet et al, 2003).

Comparing four community garden projects, VELT registered the following common values people pointed out: belonging, being together with other people, creating, the gardening itself is satisfying, having healthy vegetables (no pesticides), the ecological importance and the informal learning aspect.

Another type of community garden (in French speaking regions also called 'solidarity garden' or 'jardins collectifs d'insertion') is the one emphasizing social integration and poverty reduction. This brings us back to the objectives of the first type of community-organized gardens from the beginning of the twentieth century. But there is an important difference: the first type of garden were focusing on the workers and the working class while the actual ones

try to improve the living conditions and competences of those without any job (even “sans papiers”) and struggling with poverty. The recent economic crises increases the demand of this type (Cerezuelle, 1999, Penet, et al, 2003; Dossogne, 2009).

It's notable that a lot of the Anglo-American and French literature concerning community gardening focuses on poverty reduction and empowerment, while Flemish literature holds a plea for sustainability and social cohesion. At the same time it is a rather new field of interest that also contains new elements like urban development and the use of public space.

Community gardens PLUS: The BIODREAM-project

When focusing on the BIODREAM-project this idea of ‘Gardening together’ is very similar but only a starting point for the partners. **It seems like a new form of community gardening arises.**

In March 2012 the three founding partners (cultural centers, the ecological center and the city department ‘living together’) together with the neighbors and neighborhood organizations created a garden at the left bank area of the city. Besides the gardening, the project also aims to be an artistic meeting point and installations throughout the garden refer to nature and ecology. This starting point already emphasizes the multifocal aim of the project.



With the BIODREAM-project the partners wanted:

- To (permanently) connect citizens with nature and gardening in particular
- To connect citizens with art
- To create an inspiring meeting point for the neighborhood
- To connect as many people as possible within the Left Bank area of the city through intensive guidance
- To upgrade that specific place of the city (Europark)
- To create a place where people can learn about ecological gardening

What makes this project unique is the fact that the garden is a community garden in the first place. The community garden is built around the principal that participants work voluntary to develop a common project (vegetable garden, artwork, office room, shelter for equipment, sitting area, a stage, a shop, a place to cook, a playing area for the kids...). Individual gardening is possible as a result of the common project. The partners of the project worked out an alternative system to validate the work of participants so people can enjoy the benefits of the garden. It's a place for action and creation for meeting and relaxing.

For Antwerp the BIODREAM-project is a pioneering project. When we are writing this abstract it is still not clear how the project can continue. Can the guidance of the different partners continue? Will there be city support for the project? Can the participants continue with the project themselves? How did the project meet the aims that were set out? Are other projects starting up?



Profile, added value and aspirations of the participants of the BIODREAM-project

Based on a survey (N=57) and in depth interviews of 6 participants we tried to categorize the aspirations and values. Comparing to other community gardens at least half of the regular participants or volunteers are not living in the neighborhood of the garden. Considering the added value, it doesn't seem to make any difference and the results of this limited investigation seem to confirm the findings of the literature.

Respondents mention:

- 1) *Food security and economic benefit* (including affordable organic food).
'It is a useful activity to spend my leisure time. You get something out of it, the vegetables' (Respondent 4)
- 2) *Ecological values*, green environment and the use of public space: an oasis of green and quietness in a stressful and fast daily urban life.
- 3) *Family relations*: this type of mixed activities- community garden offers the potential for recreation and family based leisure time activities. Even grandparents experience this as an opportunity for a common activity with their grandchildren.
- 4) *Social benefits*, citizenship and the potential for (increasing) social capital. For some participants the community garden is above all a meeting place. Without any formal agreements people can visit the community garden and on a very flexible way participation at activities is possible. The 'open or easy access principle' should guarantee the participation of a mixture of participants. The common care for the gardening, the cultivation of vegetables or the participation in arts or other activities facilitates contacts or communication. It regards both new contacts and existing ones with neighbors.

"I didn't expect to be introduced to so many new people. I even met neighbors whom I never had met before. I am living on my own and it makes me happy to realize that I can come whenever I want." (Respondent 2)

'Being together, the contacts with other people. It is so good that nobody is forced to participate nothing is obliged. You just can come and walk... You meet a lot of very different people with one thing in common: the gardening.' (Respondent 5)

The feeling of 'common ownership' is an element of the social benefits and citizenship: for many participants or volunteers 'being or feeling at home' in the community garden was much appreciated.

- 5) Some people mention *educational or pedagogical issues*. It considers the individual participants and learning about agriculture and cultivation of organic vegetables and fruits as well as part of family or intergenerational relations. Living in an urban area people feel the necessity to bring their children in contact with nature and elements of agriculture.

"I sometimes come with my grandchildren. They like it and have fun. I think that is much better than sitting inside and watching television and they learn something about nature." (Respondent 2)



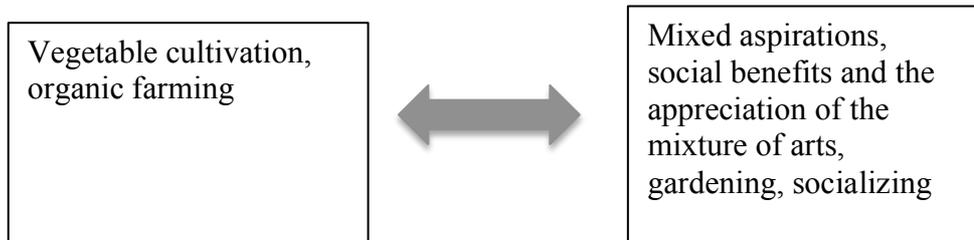
Although positive image building of the area was an objective of the BIODREAM-project, few people mention this changing potential of the garden.

An unexpected added value or latent function of the garden concerns the facilities for people with physical disabilities. Gardening for people with back problems or people in a wheelchair

isn't an easy task, but gardening in a demolition and waste bags, DW-bags, (as it is the case in this project) is an ideal solution. Moreover if people are not able to come (linked to health or not) during a certain period, others will look after their small DW bag-garden.

“I am disabled, so I never could work in an ‘traditional’ garden, but those bags are an ideal solution. I knew an old man and he gave his garden to his neighbors because he was unable due to physical problems to work in the garden. I stimulated him to come to the BIODREAM-project because he loved gardening and in the end I succeeded. I feel very proud about that.” (Respondent 5)

There is not a real hierarchical ordering of the values, but it is linked to different backgrounds and aspirations of people. At least two types can be distinguished



Challenges and tendencies

Developing community activities, taking into account those different backgrounds and aspirations, is a challenge for social-cultural work and community gardens like the BIODREAM-project are an adapted answer.

But tensions are never far away:

“I prefer a community organised vegetable garde where I can grow my own vegetables. In the BIODREAM-project you don't have a place of your own. If I would have that, I would definately come more often. Now I usually have to weed and I don't like that. “ (Respondant 1)

“I very much like the combination of activities here, it all fits! (Respondant 3)

“I don’t like the variety of activities, that underlines the gardening proces, that’s my opinion. But the workshops we get on ecological gardening are very good!”
(Respondant 4)

Another challenge is linked to bonding and bridging and attracting a real mixture of people with different ethnic and/or social-economic background. The vast majority has a degree of higher education. And last but not least the challenge of combining, individual benefit, sharing activities and community or collective objectives.

When looking at tendencies that reinforce these types of community gardens we point out two trends: *urban agriculture* and *social innovation*.

In 2011 the Government department of Agriculture in Flanders presented a report with recommendations for the role of city agriculture in urban areas. Urban agriculture shapes urban needs by combining local food production with the civil need for nature, peace and quiet, social cohesion etc., and therefore contributes to the livability and sustainability of the city. Urban agriculture can sustain our consumption- and production patterns, it offers opportunities to enhance local food security, social employment, integration, livability, education, recreation, waste management etc. Urban agriculture can contribute to a transition process towards a new paradigm in society. The report emphasizes the need to preserve space for urban agriculture and because of the high pressure on that space, a more multifunctional use of space. Agriculture itself should also go through a process of transition to meet the terms of people in urban areas and the social relation with these groups. That calls for a high level of political courage (Dankaert, Cazeux, Bas & Gijsegheem, 2010).

When looking at the recommendations made in the report, we can conclude that the BIODREAM-project works on several aspects. First there is the need to adjust with other policy fields. Food can be play a large role in the integration process of different policy fields. Secondly there is the need to stimulate action and new initiatives and strengthen the competences of people who want to be involved in urban agriculture. Within the project there is a large focus on informal education and people get stimulated to act and think about a new connection with urban agriculture.

In 2012 the Flemish government started up the ‘Social Innovation Factory’. Social innovation is another tendency in which we can find the link with experimental community garden projects. In their mission statement, the factory claims the position of promoting and supporting social innovation and entrepreneurship. Three main values guide their work: attention for finding common gains, a focus on social transformation and driven by impact. They want to establish a positive and creative culture around innovation in Flanders by informing and activating everyone who wants to innovate. Social innovation is interpreted as an innovative solution for a social challenge that results in a product, a service, a model or method. Social innovations often evolve around people or organizations who dare to dream of a possible other future. The partner network that established the BIODREAM-project may be seen as social innovators, or as people who dare to dream... .

3. The role of sociocultural work regarding community garden projects

The majority of the participants in the project, emphasize the role of professional coordination of the project. This is where the social-cultural worker comes in.

Looking into the different types of community gardens in Flanders and more specifically in Antwerp, gives us an idea of the context. If we want to explore the contribution of socio-cultural work within that field, we need to clarify the framework on that profession as well.

In Flanders we have a strong tradition in government support for sociocultural organizations (sociocultural work with adults, art projects, youth work etc. ...). In an attempt to identify what sociocultural work is, Baert, De Vriendt & Ketelslegers (2003) worked out a sociocultural framework to identify the role of sociocultural work.

The framework starts with a common view on people that sociocultural organizations share. Main aspects in that view are: people are curious and they want to understand the world that surrounds them by *building up knowledge and searching for information*, people shape their world by *taking action* and they are able to create change, people *look for norms and values*, people look for *communication and interaction* with others and finally people want to *create and explore*. A society must provide the basic conditions for people to develop these qualities. Shared values are: a strive for a democratic, peaceful and righteous society, respect for

differences and diversity as a fact, sustainable development of the society and creating citizenship (Baert, De Vriendt & Ketelslegers 2003).

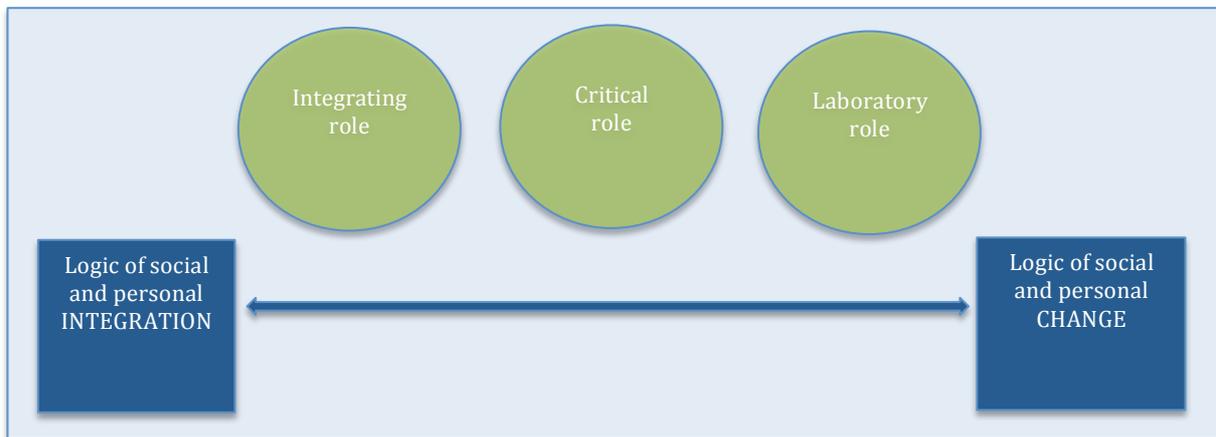
Based on the above, the identity of sociocultural work evolves around four positions:

- A *cultural* position that focuses on working with values, meanings and norms (the ideological level), the whole of meaningful actions, reactions and interactions of people (the behavioral level) and/or working with cultural goods (material level).
- An *educational* position that focuses on the learning of individuals or groups.
- A *community* position that focuses on creating more, better and different communities.
- An *activating* position that focuses on personal and collective change in thinking and acting in relation to society.

Within those roles, the sociocultural worker can work with open targets and interventions towards the participants. In the BIODREAM-project all of these positions are important. Interventions of social-cultural workers are situated on the four positions. Stimulating people to think about nature through art, connecting the garden with artists, programming performances, are clearly examples of working from a cultural position. Stimulating social and informal learning processes, organizing workshops, participating in the garden work yourself, are examples of how to play an educational role as a social-cultural worker. Emphasizing the importance of organic and ecological food consumption, activating policy makers to think about urban design and agriculture, making people aware of the environment and working on sustainability are clear examples of the activating role of social-cultural workers. And finally working on a neighborhood level, creating new communities bring in the community position of the work.

In 2010 SOCIUS, the support organization for social-cultural work with adults (in Flanders) finished a research project on these different positions, trying to clarify the role of social-cultural work. Participants of social-cultural work activities all confirm the four different positions as mentioned before and the connection between them. But a survey showed that another dimension needed to be added to these positions: *meeting people and having a relaxing time*. Thinking about social-cultural work needs to consider these two important motivators for people (Cockx, 2010). The results of our small survey emphasize this as well.

When looking at the positions of social-cultural work and the connection between the four, Cockx (2010) stipulates three roles for social-cultural work: an *integrating* role, a *critical* role and a *laboratory* role. These roles can be situated between the dichotomy of two logics: the logic of integrating into the existing society and the logic of change.



The BIODREAM-project definitely emphasizes the importance of playing that critical and laboratory role as a social-cultural worker. Training social-cultural workers must force young people to investigate that role towards social change and innovation.

4. Conclusion

Triggered by the aspirations of the BIODREAM-project, we started to look into the connection of community gardening and social-cultural work. A small survey and looking into to evaluation data of the project, gave us inside information on the effects of the project. Of course further research is needed to empower the ideas and to spread out this dynamic of urban development. But the first results strengthen the idea that there is an important role for social-cultural work in re-enforcing community garden projects. A professional guidance can create large opportunities in neighborhoods, communities and individuals. Especially in deprived or neglected areas. We, trainers of social-cultural workers, need to set the bar high when it comes to training young people towards creativity, innovation and awareness. A challenge we dare to take!

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