

The Gathering Tree Community Garden:
Inclusive development — working with the marginalised and disadvantaged

Ireland M^{1*} & Simmons K^{2*}

¹ Adelaide Central Community Health Service, Prospect East, South Australia, Australia

² Eastern Community Mental Health Service, Enfield, South Australia

Abstract

The Gathering Tree Community Garden is a joint initiative between Adelaide Central Community Health Service, South Australian Housing Trust and Eastern Community Mental Health Service. This project is based in the backyard of a South Australian Housing Trust home located in Kilburn and the garden was designed to promote and encourage an atmosphere of community collaboration and ownership. The house located on the same site is utilised as a community meeting and information place.

The garden's aims and objectives incorporate key elements from The 3rd National Mental Health Plan (2003–2008) including “the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental health problems and mental illness, increasing service responsiveness” by providing increased access to recovery and rehabilitation programs outside of clinical frameworks, “strengthening” consumer and carer participation and “fostering research, innovation and sustainability” (Australian Health Ministers 2003, p. 13).

The garden provides an outstanding example of how marginalised and disadvantaged people can be encouraged to participate in community development activities, which add to their daily quality of life.

This presentation will tell the story of the garden's evolution, its struggle for survival and the capacity of marginalised communities to make a difference in their local area.

Introduction

The Gathering Tree Community Garden Project is a story about participation and inclusion, developing relationships of acceptance and mutual respect, inclusiveness, collaborative partnerships, long-term commitment and sustainability along with work that is nurturing both the community and the Earth. The garden promotes respect for and care of humankind and the environment.

The Gathering Tree Community Garden Project developed as a community capacity building activity within the Kilburn South Urban Renewal Project. Kilburn South forms part of the suburbs of Kilburn/Blair Athol. These are areas of high need, a fact supported by census statistics and other studies of the area. One-third of the area is supported by public housing. Much of this housing is allocated to housing priority clients, creating a high dependency on support services. Since the 1930s negative perceptions of Kilburn have developed in the wider

Adelaide community. In fact, it may be realistic to say that Kilburn became socially excluded as a combination of linked problems including high unemployment, low incomes, poor housing, criminal activity and poor health.

Urban renewal

The Urban Renewal project was to take place over a five-year period, bringing a significant change to the local community and the community infrastructure. Situated within the project area, the South Australian Housing Trust had allocated a home to be used as a community information house for the life of the urban renewal project.

The house provided a gathering point for local and nearby residents to gain information about the project and to participate in community activities. The house had a large backyard, which became an available space for developing a community garden.

In November 2002, a community consultation process identified as Imagine Kilburn gave some voice to the need for a communal gardening space including a community orchard.

In March 2003, supported by the local neighborhood development officer, a small group of people came together to discuss the idea of developing a garden at the community information house. The enthusiasm and support for a community garden was high and the approval was sought and received from the Urban Renewal project manager. The South Australian Housing Trust supported the project by financing the purchase of necessary garden equipment and plants.

Participation and inclusion

Participation and inclusion in decision-making processes was high on the agenda. The garden evolved around a common held philosophy that people affected by decisions need to be involved in making them. "Participatory planning is a vital aspect of community development and any community development strategy must incorporate formal or informal mechanisms for local people to have a genuine role in the making of priority decisions" (Ife 1995, p.138).

Engaging the local community was pursued with the following conditions in mind.

1. People would participate if they felt the activity was important
2. People must feel that their action will make a difference
3. Different forms of participation must be acknowledged and valued
4. People must be enabled to participate and supported in their participation
5. Structures and processes must not be alienating.

The background of the participants did not matter, as it mattered only that the participants endeavoured to join the community effort and work toward a common goal.

The group discussed the type of garden they would like to establish. The decision was a garden based on the principles of organic gardening.

The group considered that by developing the garden:

- a communal space for people to learn, share and create gardening expertise would be provided
- local residents would be encouraged to increase their knowledge and practice of organic gardening which would benefit the local ecology
- a training ground for people to develop skills which they could then implement in their own backyards would be available
- socially isolated people within the community would be encouraged to participate generating a sense of purpose, identity and pride.

Developing, maintaining and working within collaborative partnerships

The project's success can be attributed to the dedication and time taken by two key organisations to develop, maintain and work collaboratively. Adelaide Central Community Health Service and Eastern Community Mental Health Service have different structures and different client groups but operate with similar philosophies. The commonly held belief that more can be achieved when people and organisations come together to form, encourage and support collaborative partnerships with individuals and community groups has been a consistent driver for the project.

News of the gardens early development soon spread to the local Eastern Community Mental Health Service who were, at the time, looking for and developing community programs for their clients to access. The garden project soon developed into a collaborative project between Kilburn South Urban Renewal Project, Eastern Community Mental Health Service and Adelaide Central Community Health Service.

Key elements from *The 3rd National Mental Health Plan* (2003) were incorporated into the garden's aims and objectives and include:

1. "Promoting mental health and the prevention of mental health problems and mental illness... by working with communities to increase their capacity to support active participation by all members fostering environments that promote mental well being" (Australian Health Ministers 2003, p. 13). The garden project has become a place where members of the general community have been able to increase their understanding of mental health issues helping to reduce the stigma experienced by people with mental health problems generally.
2. "Increasing/Improving service responsiveness, ... by fostering evidence-based recovery and rehabilitation programs within and outside clinical frameworks, and across the public, private and non-government sectors, including psychosocial, recreational and vocational programs" (Australian Health Ministers 2003, p.13). The garden provides an opportunity for organisations to refer people to who have an interest in gardening. Working within a recovery oriented environment the persons strengths, interests and abilities are the focus rather than the illness or disability. People attending the garden are also encouraged to pursue a variety of personal goals to support the ongoing connection with their local community.

Community capacity building

All people and communities have capacity. The core of any capacity building project is people who have an interest in and are willing to become involved in their community. An indication that capacity is building in a community is that people are active, interested and participating in what's going on. Community capacity building is an inclusive process, which places emphasis on the existing strengths and abilities of people and communities.

From the outset the garden espoused the philosophy of community capacity building, supporting inclusive decision-making processes that have strengthened the autonomy of individuals leading to community ownership of the garden and individual empowerment.

Each Wednesday afternoon a group of approximately 10 to 20 people gathered to transform an empty backyard into what would become a local food supply for the personal and collective use of the members. Garden group members have also become involved in ongoing meetings to steer the gardens progress, learning new skills in this area along the way.

Research and learning

In the beginning the group visited three other community gardens to gain ideas, and held a planning session facilitated by Ian Lillington from the Community Gardens Network to develop a concept plan. Work began to bring the plan to reality. A no-dig garden bed was created and the group began planting potatoes, broad beans, herbs and a variety of vegetables and flowers. A decision was made that, as far as possible, the garden would follow permaculture principles or at least remain organic.

In the coming months, training workshops, e.g. compost making, worm farming and plant propagation to facilitate the development of the garden, were held. Funding and sponsorship were sought to ensure the garden's sustainability. The garden was promoted in local community newsletters and at local community events.

Reinforcing ties with the neighbourhood

As news of the garden spread further into the community, a local high school sought an opportunity to participate, providing an opportunity for 'at-risk' students to contribute to a community activity whilst at the same time completing their SACE certificate. This activity assisted to bring people who would not normally interact into an environment where respect for each other, teamwork and cooperation were mutually beneficial to all.

As the garden gained momentum, the need for a facilitator for the project became apparent. A successful application was made to Port Adelaide Enfield Council for a community development grant. A horticulturist was employed part-time to attend on a Wednesday afternoon to assist with the facilitation and leadership of the garden.

An approach was made to the local hardware store, which started to assist the group by providing plants that were no longer considered saleable but would respond to careful nurturing. It was seen that there was a comparative tale evolving and saw that people and plants respond to careful nurturing.

The garden began to extend its reach into the community by providing produce for the local community lunch program, along with providing a pathway for garden participants to the lunch program and other community programs and events. Increased networks were adding to the social capital of the community, along with the ability of individuals to reduce their isolation by developing friendships and increasing their quality of life.

Relationships of acceptance and mutual respect

The journey has been one of many people coming and going, staying and moving on. Age, gender, nationality, physical and social ability have all had their place. From the outset people have been encouraged and supported to create an environment of acceptance and mutual respect. People are accepted for the strengths they bring and not for the limitations they display. The community garden offers a safe environment where the participants have learnt to trust and offer mutual support to each other. Having a worker trained in mental health has been beneficial in supporting community members that attend the garden who may have a mental illness but are not connected to any particular support service.

Long-term commitment

Two years later, and the inevitable has happened — the impending redevelopment and sale of the information house has led the group to exploring and negotiating a new space for the garden to rebirth. Members of the group spoke with local government officials and other service providers. In November 2004 a community meeting was held to find a new long-term commitment to community gardening in the Kilburn area. Several options were discussed as a possible location for the new garden. As a result of the meeting an offer was put forward by a local church. The church had a parcel of unused land, plans to build a Life Centre, and the vision to see that a community gardening project in their patch would benefit not only the existing garden participants but also the church congregation, church neighbours and the community generally.

And so the process has begun. This time there is a larger audience and more interest in a proven successful community activity and project. In March 2005, the local community was invited to a 'community visioning' session at the church to begin to 'imagine' what a community garden in this space might look like. A well-known and experienced landscape architect was invited to facilitate discussions with the 50 people who attended. Again, participatory planning led to the development of a professional landscape for the garden.

New life brings new or renewed investment. Many local agencies have offered financial and in-kind support to this new venture. The future looks good but the 'new' garden will need the active participation of many to make it a reality.

A typical session

Every Wednesday afternoon (rain or shine) from 1.30 pm to 3.30 pm, a group of community members meet at the garden. Work-plans are developed a week ahead where ever possible. This usually occurs at the weekly afternoon tea meeting. The group stops at 3 pm to share a meal made from fresh ingredients from the garden. Some favourites have included stir-fries, salads, sandwiches, pumpkin soup, pumpkin scones and, often, home-baked bread is provided by a local community member. When the weather is good people gather around on the hay bale circle to chat and discuss how the garden is progressing and plan activities for the next week and any future developments. This is also used as a time to gather feedback from the group participants; for the most part the feedback is always positive indicating the need for such a project within the community and the level of comfort experienced by the group. After each session the facilitators document the outcomes of the afternoon, including attendances, and actions for the following week.

Personal stories — ‘Community champions’

Daniel is 37 years old and a long-term consumer of mental health services. He joined the group in its very early days. Daniel’s very early comments included “Why haven’t there been projects like this before?” From the outset, a very deliberate attempt was made not to categorise or label people but to be inclusive of everyone. Wednesday garden day has become a regular feature of Daniel’s life. It provides for him social contact, friendships and the opportunity to engage in some physical work. Daniel understands his health and limitations and is always mindful of what he can and cannot do. Daniel’s self-esteem has grown and he now assumes a peer educator role at the garden, providing information and support to new attendees.

Mary is a 50-year-old woman who suffers from bouts of severe depression and anxiety. Her ability to function is often influenced by relapses. Mary has learned much by being at the garden and has added to her existing skills and abilities. So much has Mary learnt that she has now transformed an area of garden surrounding her own unit, which benefits herself and her neighbours with a plentiful supply of fresh vegetables.

Nathan is 29 years old. Nathan has a love of gardening and the earth. As well as participating in regular garden activities, Nathan has achieved a senior first aid certificate and has participated in a job readiness program based on horticulture and landscaping. Nathan has many skills and utilises these in his own garden as well. As with all participants at the garden, Nathan’s self confidence and self-esteem have improved immensely.

Sandy is a member of a local community reference group. Sandy is no gardener but a supporter of the project. She displays empathy for the garden and the participants. She attends each week providing conversation, a fresh home-baked loaf of bread and a helping hand with kitchen and clean-up duties. Sandy is a maker of statues and has donated to the garden a large ‘laughing Buddha’ to bring the garden good fortune and prosperity.

Conclusion

The Gathering Tree Community Garden project has provided and continues to provide:

- ongoing development in gardening skills
- encouragement and promotion of community participation and community building
- linking socially isolated people together through the formation of friendships and networks
- the space for people to become more active in their community and participate in community activities and events
- opportunities for individual and group development and psychological wellbeing
- a bonding and bridging function — encouraging and empowering participants to take on an even more active role in the further development of their neighbourhood
- an opportunity to dispel myths
- an environment to address and reduce stigma
- motivation and the ability to empower participants
- opportunities for facilitators to understand, work with and assist those who have much to give if given the opportunity to do so.

This has been an important and memorable journey for all of the participants along the way, the facilitators and the local community. And the journey continues with the 'new' Gathering Tree Community Garden.

References

Ife J 1995, *Community Development: Creating community alternatives – vision, analysis and practice*, Addison Wesley Longman Australia.

Australian Health Ministers 2003, *National Mental Health Plan 2003 –2008*, Australian Government, Canberra.