Growing Community Through Urban Agriculture: A Community-University Project Involving Senior Immigrants

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INTRODUCTION

Immigrants represent a significant proportion of the senior population in urban Canada, but their adaptation and integration into Canadian society can be extremely challenging due to a number of socio-economic and environmental circumstances, such as language barriers, lack of economic security, and poor health. Urban agriculture is increasingly recognized for its contributions to individual health and well-being, income generation, and overall development of more sustainable communities.

In 2007 a community-university engagement (CUE) pilot project (Faculty of Extension, the Seniors’ Association of Greater Edmonton (SAGE) and the Multicultural Health Broker Cooperative Ltd. (MCHB)) was launched in Edmonton to train senior immigrants in a new approach to commercial urban agriculture, known as S- small P- lot IN- tensive (SPIN) Farming. SPIN Farming integrates relay planting, to maximize harvest volume as well as economic gain, and organic farming methods, which reduce reliance on external inputs by eliminating the use of synthetically manufactured fertilizers and pesticides.

METHODS

We utilized exploratory (Stebbins, 2001) and qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) approaches to investigate the first year of the pilot project. Two sets of interviews (n=26) were conducted, at the end of the workshop and after final harvest, with seniors, the gardening coordinator, SPIN trainers and representatives from SAGE and MCHB. Interviews with senior immigrants included interpretation by a MCHB representative where necessary. Grounded theory was used as a framework for data analysis (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), as issues and themes were drawn from the data.

The pilot was divided into two phases.

Phase one (Jan.–Feb. 2007) involved participant recruitment followed by a three-day SPIN training workshop. To facilitate learning and engagement, language interpretation was provided by MCHB brokers. The SPIN trainers developed the workshop to accommodate language translation by simplifying the context and pacing their presentation accordingly. They also relied extensively on visual aids (photographs on poster boards and as part of a PowerPoint presentation), and incorporated hands-on demonstrations of tools and equipment.

Phase two (Mar.–Sep. 2007) involved preparation for and implementation of SPIN-Farming. SAGE provided overall coordination, and MCHB provided language support for the seniors as needed. A coordinator, Maureen Elhatton, with extensive horticultural teaching experience was hired by SAGE to oversee development and assist the seniors in the daily running of the project.

RESULTS

1. Assessment of Learning and Engagement
   - Novel initiative linking senior immigrants and commercial UA (academic and public interest)
   - Effective CUE and collaboration
   - Networking (UA, food security, seniors, immigrants)
   - Effective learning and knowledge mobilization
   - Challenges
     - Funding, income generation, limited intra-cultural exchange, physical capacity, infrastructure (storage, processing)

   “You know, it’s in my memory, it was crazy back then (during war)...This (SPIN project) is beautiful because all the different people come together and work together. That is first for me, then the vegetables to eat and lost money.” - SPIN workshop participant

2. Impact on Seniors
   - Food security/nutrition
     - Vegetables, ethnic foods
   - Physical well-being
     - Movement, variety of exercises, fresh air
   - Mental well-being
     - Confidence, identity, aesthetic pleasure, reduce stress, relaxation, learning, pride
   - Income
     - Reduced spending, profit divided
   - Social well-being
     - Engagement in landscapes, reduce isolation, friendships, family, sharing of food and seeds, social exchange, interaction among ethnic groups, leadership, conflict
   - Cultural Connections
     - Food and gardening, language exchange, media attention
   - Environment
     - Organic, reduce food miles, beauty

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