**Measuring the Effects of Greening on the Social Capital of an Urban Community**

**Antonieta Castro-Cosio, Public and Urban Policy PhD Candidate, The New School**

**INTRODUCTION**

In an attempt to understand the processes that underpin the relationship between the environment and society in social-ecological systems, this research evaluates the effect of a four-year urban reforestation and community stewardship program on the different levels of social capital of an urban community in Queens, NY.

Social capital and its components have been identified as building blocks of a community’s resilience.

For the purposes of this research, social capital refers to:

- Features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1993:167). It has been found to be essential in helping communities manage and distribute resources efficiently.

**FINDINGS**

The focus of this research was on key stewardship leaders who requested trees for their neighborhood through the Greening Western Queens Program. The evaluation focuses on the effects the trees and their stewardship activities have had on three types of social capital:

**Bonding — with their green spaces and the trees**

- 82% personally took care of trees on a frequent basis and felt happy and proud doing so.

  “Because they help in so many ways... They don’t discriminate against anybody, they’re here for everybody, whether you’re rich or poor. You can always see a tree for shade, it helps you breathe... the benefits are just great.”

**Bridging — with their neighbors**

- 85% said their involvement with the initiative resulted in new connections in their neighborhood.

  “People are engaging with each other, and that’s ultimately one of the values of our group, is that people connect, they’re connecting... When we have our potluck events people are just sitting together, eating a meal together, and getting to know one another.”

  “Now I feel if something were to happen to my home while I’m away, there are people looking out for it.”

**Linking — with government and non-profit partners**

- 80% were invited to participate in their local community planning process as a result of their involvement with the Greening Western Queens Community Forestry Project.

  “My tree was the first one that was planted with that program, and the Sunnyside planted mine.”

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MODEL**

**The Greening Western Queens Community Forestry Project was based on the Partnerships for Parks Catalyst model of community engagement which Builds community participation and pride, Connects people, ideas and efforts in order to Share goals, and Sustains local leadership and green space stewardship.**

Before the new street trees were planted, and to build awareness about the tree planting project, the program partners engaged local citizens and stakeholder organizations in a series of 27 existing conditions inventory sessions.

22 Tree care workshops were held throughout the project area to certify citizens as tree care stewards, and 100’s of tree care and greening activities were organized in collaboration with program partners and community stakeholders.

The new street trees were planted only where community members requested them and agreed to take care of them. In most cases, they also agreed to mobilize their neighbors to help care for the newly planted trees.

Nine active stewardship hubs formed in response to the new trees and program activities led and organized by the community partners.

The active hubs are now an interconnected network of well trained citizen stewards committed to caring for the Western Queens urban environment over the long term.

**METHODS/HYPOTHESIS**

During the last eight months of 2014, Antonieta Castro-Cosio, a doctoral candidate in the Public and Urban Policy Program at The New School, conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with key leaders from the stewardship hubs, as well as 5 interviews with the stakeholder partners.

Mixed methods were used to capture the types and levels of the social capital identified in the communities which were affected by the planting of trees, their relationships with the community, and related greening activities.

The hypothesis is that the different types of social capital in the communities have been enhanced as a result of this initiative. Preliminary findings confirm this argument but qualitative analysis is still underway.