Rapid Assessment of Urban Forest Equity Pilot

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Overview

Our work initiated with an introductory call with partners from City Plants and US Forest Service to learn more about the goals and background context for the Urban Forest Equity Pilot Program. Following this we reviewed documents describing City Plants' plan for the pilot program and their communication materials that have been developed. We supplemented these materials with other relevant peer-reviewed articles, white papers, and tools and resources available online that could potentially support the implementation of the program. Based on priorities that were raised by City Plants in the intro meeting, the review and recommendations focus on a culturally responsive approach to engage with community members, and to ensure the tree-planting strategies align with their needs towards creating resilient communities. The recommendations and guidelines are organized into the following three areas in relation to the pilot program.

Observations and Recommendations

General Approach

We acknowledge that for urban forestry efforts to benefit communities in equitable ways, they need to be mindful of the social, political, and ecological contexts in the places they occur. As intended by the Pilot, intentional strategies to work closely with community members and/or partner organizations closely familiar with the communities of focus will be a critical part of the work, even before the actual tree-planting begins, to learn more about community priorities, in the process of building a relationship with them. With that in mind, we suggest the following to help frame the project and support the community engagement:

1. **Organize the project objectives into phases that identify a practical trajectory for the planned work.** For example, we suggest reframing objectives related to public and partner engagement (#6-8) in the first phase, followed by those related to supporting their tree-planting efforts (#1-2) in the second, all of which will help achieve the targeted ecological impacts (#3-5) that are more realistic in the relative long-term.

2. **Strategically prioritize or set realistic expectations about the non-profit partners who will be ideally suited to support the Pilot.** In this process, consider whose motivations, interests, and level of buy-in will best support an approach to thoughtfully engage with community members. See this *framework for community engagement* (https://bit.ly/2EHgtXW) for urban forest sustainability efforts that describes the roles of the various stakeholders in urban forestry efforts (refer to Table 2 in the linked document).

3. **Critically examine the Pilot's goals of community engagement to ensure transparency in the process consistently.** This is especially critical when engaging socio-economically vulnerable groups and individuals, who have typically not had opportunities for participation or decision-making related to their communities. For example, limited trust in city and other local organizations may be barriers to their authentic involvement. See this resource describing a "ladder of citizen participation" that highlights the level of power and agency public audiences hold in engagement processes (https://www.citizenshandbook.org/arnsteinsladder.html).

4. **Prepare and plan purposefully for communications and interactions with community members.** We recommend that especially for in-person meetings the goal be one of relationship-building to help foster trust between stakeholders who have not worked together. This is especially true for the first meeting, which we strongly recommend be an opportunity to share interests, priorities, and needs in relation to the Pilot. See this resource (appendix A) providing action modes to adopt for culturally responsive interactions between different groups of stakeholders. If the goal for community engagement is to foster a collaboration see this framework (appendix B) for themes of focus around environmental priorities. For community engagement specifically around urban forestry, refer to the resource to engage diverse communities in this toolkit (https://www.vibrantcitieslab.com/resources/how-to-engage-diverse-communities-a-toolkit/).

Messaging

Our recommendations for this component are a corollary to #3-4 above.

5. Create opportunities during the initial interactions with community members for them to share their perspectives on the role of trees and green spaces in the neighborhood. This will enable a deeper understanding of their relationship to the local ecology and the value they perceive in tree-planting approaches, which can be incorporated into future messaging. This process will also identify potential negative perceptions of trees (e.g., from expectations of perceived burden of maintenance).

6. **Shift the focus of outreach and communication (that may happen prior to #5) to emphasize the benefits of trees for the community rather than an individual.** This framing will harness communal bonds that may already exist so that improvements in quality of life from tree plantings would be shared collectively. Additionally, we suggest a frame that is more participatory for shared learning (e.g., the front-page message could be "Clean air/shade from trees/natural beauty builds a stronger community").

Evaluation

Our recommendations here are based on approaching evaluation as an opportunity to track the progress of the Pilot and make improvements on an ongoing basis. This will enable

putting in place relevant indicators that would help document progress towards the objectives of the Pilot.

7. **Develop a logic model for the Pilot to map out its various components.** You can use this resource from the Kellogg Foundation (appendix C) to do this. This will allow you to create a visual representation that connects all the components including its primary goal, the stakeholders involved (e.g., non-profit partners), the activities you've planned, the numbers you wish to track (outputs) and the human-centric changes you want to see in your community (outcomes). Outcomes could relate to knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, emotions, or skills

8. **Identify outcomes you envision for the stakeholders involved to track progress.** Consider what the community members may learn or demonstrate regarding tree-planting as a result of this Pilot (e.g., interest in learning more about tree-planting, working with neighbors to take care of communal trees, feeling empowered to care for their community, interacting more with City Plants and other non-profit partners). Similar to the indicators of ecological resilience being tracked, (bullets 1-2), consider how the Pilot can support the community's resilience in the long-term (e.g., leading tree-planting events in the neighborhood, becoming skilled and trained in tree maintenance).

References

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