



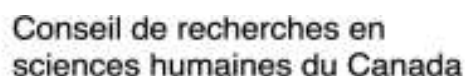
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## Practices in stakeholder engagement as an emerging urban food project

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Lauren H. Ames, January 2017

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## ***Executive Summary***

Young City Growers is a new and growing urban farm initiative that is encountering problems of balancing limited capacity with the increasing interest in the project. Close connections with stakeholders and partners was an integral part of the inception of the Young City Growers project, and maintaining and fostering these connections has been a core mission as the project has grown. Through interviews with key partners and stakeholders of the project, these relationships have been evaluated to see the way these connections and efforts have been perceived, and to create greater understanding of the resources and opportunities available to Young City Growers and where there is potential to improve. The consensus of the interviewees was that a strong point of Young City Growers is the fostering of connections with a variety of organizations, and that stakeholders at various levels appreciated the value of not only their relationship with Young City Growers, but the value of Young City Growers' work in the community and its impact on youth, the environment, and food culture. It became clear through the interviews, however, that because of limited capacity within Young City Growers, the clarity of communication and reciprocity between Young City Growers and its partners and stakeholders has become limited also. I am proposing two key recommendations for improving this communication and therefore strengthening the relations between Young City Growers and its stakeholders. The first is to create a role, potentially through an internship or volunteer opportunity that focuses on communications and business administration. And the second is to put a focus on storytelling and ensure that the story and mission of Young City Growers is being accurately represented.

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### ***Key Problems:***

Limited Capacity, Financial Sustainability, and Communications

### ***Recommendations:***

Storytelling; and  
An intern/volunteer role with focus on communications

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The idea behind Young City Growers was developed by Fanis Juma-Radstake, a Waterloo Region citizen who has been dedicated and active in initiatives to better the community for years. Reflecting on her own background as a Kenyan immigrant, Fanis noticed a strong difference in the way that the youth of a community are involved in the local food system. In her childhood, everyone had been involved in the production of food in some way or another, and comparing this to her experiences raising a young family in Canada, there was not enough effort being put into helping young people build meaningful connections to their food and to the environment.

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*Working through the African Community Wellness Initiative, the core missions behind Young City Growers were developed: to create an urban food initiative that would give meaningful work opportunities and food learning to multicultural youth in the Waterloo Region, while providing affordable, fresh, organic food to the community.*

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In 2012, Fanis began working towards mobilizing support and creating community partnerships that would help the Young City Growers project idea to become a reality. Working through the African Community Wellness Initiative, the ideas and missions behind Young City Growers were developed: to create an urban food initiative that would give meaningful work opportunities and food learning to multicultural youth in the Waterloo Region, while providing affordable, fresh, organic food to the community. In 2013, Young City Growers hosted a community forum in which they presented their ideas to stakeholders, and by April 2013, after having received a grant

from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and having established a land partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University, Fanis and a team of interns and volunteers began working to transform an old baseball field into a productive urban farm. From this farm site, produce is sold to community members through a Community Shared Agriculture format, which requires that participants pay at the beginning of the season and receive weekly shares based on what is available. Besides the farm site at the Northdale Campus of Wilfrid Laurier University, Young City Growers has been contracted to create two other garden sites in the community, one at the David Fischer Residence, a home for adults with developmental disabilities, and one at KW Habilitation for use as a source of food and for programming opportunities for the citizens that they support.

And while providing this link to local, sustainable agriculture to urban communities in the Waterloo Region is an important part of the Young City Growers mission, at the core of the initiative is the drive to get youth of all backgrounds involved in community building and environmental stewardship. These opportunities can provide important job experience to young people, which helps them feel confident going into future job opportunities and empowered to make their own decisions around food, nutrition, and sustainability.

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### ***Missions:***

- Providing urban youth and young adults with green-collar job opportunities.
  - Promoting knowledge and skills of sustainable farming, environmental stewardship, local food systems, and entrepreneurial skills in operating a CSA micro-urban farm.
  - Building community capacity to address local food security and environmental issues.
  - Promoting food sovereignty in local culturally and economically diverse communities.
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As a small, emerging community initiative, Young City Growers has a variety of partners and stakeholders that benefit from or support the initiative in various ways. Gaining support or making individuals or organizations want to be involved with Young City Growers is not a challenge, as Fanis' background in community wellness and her passion for the project create a compelling story for the initiative that makes it clear the ways in which it can benefit the community.

Those who benefit most directly from the project are those at the core of Young City Growers' mission:

- The youth interns,
- The CSA (Community Shared Agriculture) members,
- The greater community of the Waterloo Region.

Through the CSA market, Young City Growers improves the affordability and accessibility of fresh, organic, local produce to community members, and improves the capacity of citizens of the Waterloo Region to address food security and food sovereignty concerns. The money generated from the market then goes into seeds,

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*“When you have an initiative like this, where I can go pick up fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, and I don't have to do anything except pay a lump sum fee, and I know where it's coming from. To me that's invaluable.”*  
- CSA Member

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*“Being an immigrant, I felt more safe with people from my kind of background, but then being in YCG I met all types of people and found that I have a lot of similarities with them. It’s allowed me to be more open in my community.”*

*– Past Intern*

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compost, and other necessities for the farm, as well as hiring young people from the community as interns. This position gives urban youth an opportunity to learn about nutrition, farming, food security, environmental stewardship, and empowers them going into future job opportunities and in making sustainable and healthy decisions. Through creating this space that brings together people from different demographics and backgrounds, Young City Growers also helps to foster a sense of belongingness in the wider community.



The other stakeholders in the project include:

- The project lead, the African Community Wellness Initiative;
- The sponsoring organization, the African Canadian Association of Waterloo Region & Area;
- The land partners, Wilfrid Laurier University and KW Habilitation;
- Supporting organizations including KW Counselling Services, Global Youth Volunteer Network, Vermont Park Neighbourhood Association, Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council, Region of Waterloo Public Health, École L’Harmonie, and Elevation;
- And the funders: the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, and the Mennonite Savings and Credit Union.

The *African Community Wellness Initiative* (ACWI) is a small local wellness initiative with the mission of supporting and creating projects that promote health, happiness, and community building among Waterloo Region citizens, especially those of African descent. Young City Growers is a project of the ACWI, and receives support in numerous ways, including administrative aid, grant hosting, and by offering a physical address, which is necessary for business operations. This connection with Young City Growers increases the African Community Wellness Initiative's profile in the community, and offers a context to those who may otherwise not know or understand the importance and prevalence of ACWI's work. The *African Canadian Association of Waterloo Region & Area* (ACAWRA) also does grant-hosting and sponsoring for the Young City Growers project.

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*"I would say [Young City Growers] is one of our top priority programs at Laurier."*  
- **Claire Bennett**,  
*Sustainability Office, WLU*

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YCG's primary land partner is *Wilfrid Laurier University*, with the main farm site being located on a previously unused space on the Laurier Northdale Campus. The relationship between Fanis and Wilfrid Laurier University had been present before the existence of Young City Growers, through the development of the Patchwork Community Garden, which is also situated at the Northdale site. Through this partnership Laurier offers Young City Growers a space for the main farm site, water as needed, some grounds maintenance, and financial capital for infrastructure. The

connection with Wilfrid Laurier is through the Sustainability Office, which sees the urban farm project as an opportunity to gain viability as an entity in the university. As well, it improves the reputation of both Wilfrid Laurier University and the Sustainability Office, because of the internal and external attention, such as news stories and the visit from the Minister of Agriculture.

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*"I think our collaboration provided those interns with increased connections, transferable skills, increased career opportunities, leadership experience, and just an appreciation for the local food movement. It was really an opportunity for people to come together who just really may not have crossed paths."*  
- **Lorraine Stavenow**,  
*Community Participation Manager, KW Habilitation*

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*KW Habilitation* is a service for Waterloo Region citizens that have developmental disabilities, providing learning opportunities, day programming, and more for differently abled adults within the community. Young City Growers and KW Habilitation were ideal partners because of the core shared values, which Lorraine Stavenow, the Community Participation Manager at KW Hab described as "connecting people with land, food, and others," and "to create a setting for diverse communities to come together in shared values and environmental stewardship." In 2014 Young City Growers and KW Habilitation came together to develop a garden on the unused space behind the site at which KW Habilitation's programming takes place. Food gardens were developed to help decrease food costs for programming, as well as raised beds and sensory gardens for allowing the citizens they provide support for to have a chance to enjoy, participate in, and learn from the gardens. A Young City Growers senior internship position was also made available through this connection, in which the interns would farm primarily at the KW Habilitation site, as well as helping in the

providing and creation of services and programming of KW Habilitation. Young City Growers also had the chance to help plan and create a rural farm space at the David Fischer Residence, a home for adults with developmental disabilities. KW Habilitation received an innovation award for the work done through



collaboration with Young City Growers, something which both partners are proud to have been a part of.

*KW Counselling Services* is a mental health clinic and counselling service in the Waterloo Region. They host a program called “Together is Better”, which facilitates community outreach and acts as a practical support for small community initiatives like African Community Wellness, like in providing a meeting space, mailing address, administrative support, mentoring, sponsoring grants, and a variety of other services depending on the needs of the independent projects or organizations that participate in this program. Young City Growers is a part of the program as a project of the African Community Wellness Initiative, which participates in the Together is Better program. The support Young City Growers in particular has received has primarily been through grant sponsoring and providing a meeting place and mailing address. This partnership allows KW Counselling to put its name out into the community in a way that is different from what people would regularly expect from a counselling service. Georgina de Barros, a Community Developer and Mental Health Worker at KW

Counselling who I spoke to, explained the positive impact that partnering with projects like Young City Growers can have on the way the community perceives not just KW Counselling, but counselling and mental health services in general. “I think people often think of a counselling service as being a service you seek when something has gone terribly wrong, and it’s sort of a dirty little secret. So we really want to eliminate some of that barrier, and we’re really just a community agency like any other, we... help people all the time with all kinds of things.”

While Young City Growers has other partners as listed, those expanded upon are the relations I had the opportunity to evaluate.

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*“We benefit from connecting into something that we don’t usually do... I think it increases our own awareness of important issues that we may overlook, it increases our scope within the community, and it also kind of puts us out there in a different way.”*

*- Georgina de Barros,  
Community Developer &  
Mental Health Worker,  
KW Counselling Services*

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There are a number of principles that guide the way that an organization or project should engage with its stakeholders in order to have successful and lasting relations that can benefit all parties. The actual practices used vary depending on the type and size of the organization or project, but the guiding principles remain the same:

- Transparency of information and efforts,
- Reporting,
- Ongoing dialogue,
- Redefining and renegotiating the relationship as necessary, and
- Reciprocity.<sup>1,2</sup>

### *Transparency and Reporting*

There is no information that Young City Growers will not make available at request of any partner, and there is plenty of information made available through social media, the Young City Growers website, and newsletters for CSA members or interested individuals. However, it has become clear that email may not be the most efficient way of sending general updates and reporting anymore, with social media being a more accessible and easily digestible option. While talking to CSA members during the market day pick-ups, I asked if they'd seen the newsletter that had been sent a week prior, and I found that most people had noticed it, but few had actually read it. Some potential solutions might be to follow the

successful format used by many organizations and news outlets<sup>3</sup>, which as applied to the small urban farm model would be to share a small piece of information along with a link to a more in depth newsletter or website update. These links could be shared through email or on the various Young City Growers social media platforms.

In the interviews conducted over the summer, I received feedback also that there had been concerns from people unable to find information on the Young City Growers website about the market, the Young City Growers project, and payment information for CSA members. A more easily comprehensible layout and more frequent updates would remedy this problem and improve transparency.

### *Ongoing Dialogue*

In the first year of this project, Young City Growers had an administrative assistant role which helped to facilitate communications. The capacity to hire interns differs from year to year, depending on how many CSA shares are sold and what external funding could be produced by way of grants or partnerships, and when there is no role to facilitate the dialogue, this duty falls back to Fanis, who already manages planting, harvesting, purchasing seeds and farm supplies, coordinating and training interns, invoicing, and running the market. And although interns do take on parts of each of those roles, the sheer amount of work makes it impossible to facilitate thorough and frequent dialogue with all partners and stakeholders. The lowered capacity to engage in this dialogue was evident this summer as opportunities to collaborate and leverage resources had to be turned down. A specific intern or volunteer role for communications could make a significant difference in the ability for Young City Growers to create ongoing and effective dialogue with its partners, and thus ensure that the partnerships are sustained and that the full benefits of the relationship can be realized both by Young City Growers and its partners.

### *Redefining and Renegotiating*

Young City Growers is an organic project that learns and changes. Everything from what is planted each year to the programming and education Young City Growers provides differs slightly each season as the experiences, mistakes and successes of the prior season help to inform each subsequent year. The



relationships with YCG stakeholders must also be redefined or renegotiated on a regular basis in order to ensure that it is clear what that partnership means and what Young City Growers and its partners expect from each other. Even when goals or missions have not changed, it could be useful to restate these goals and ensure that all partners understand and are dedicated to the same values. Georgina de Barros, YCG's contact with KW Counselling, noted this as an important part of how the relationship between Young City Growers and KW Counselling is maintained, through regular re-evaluation of what each party needs from the other and how these needs can be met.

With KW Habilitation as well, despite that Young City Growers did not have the capacity this year to connect regularly with KW Habilitation through formal meetings, the representative I spoke to still seemed to have a good understanding of the core mission and values of Young City Growers, and an understanding of what the two organizations expect of each other. "There's that sort of reciprocity in terms of things that are happening... whether it be training, education, or informal partnerships," was the way Lorraine Stavenow, the KW Habilitation Community Partnership Manager described it. It seems as though partnerships with other community-based initiatives such as KW Counselling and KW Habilitation are less difficult to negotiate than others may be, because they also operate at the community level which tends to operate under a more organic and informal approach, and so there is a basic level at which the organizations understand each other.

In an interview with the representative of the Sustainability Office at Wilfrid Laurier University, the representative called this year one of the most successful years yet for the project, because of the number of CSA members involved, which was actually the highest number the farm has had yet. The number of CSA members is certainly an important part of Young City Growers, in providing accessible, affordable foods to local communities, and creating financial capital, but it seemed as if the importance of the involvement of urban youth had been momentarily lost in celebrating that partial success. From a point of view that takes into consideration Young City Growers' dedication to employing urban youth and educating young people about food systems, community building, and environmental stewardship, this year was actually one of the less successful years. Although Young City Growers had the chance to pilot the YCG Kids program for young children, and the farm visits from the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary as a part of their course requirements, the financial capacity to hire youth interns was strained this season and the project had the fewest number of interns yet. I think that this is a case of needing ongoing dialogue to ensure that core missions and values are not being lost over time due to miscommunication.

### *Reciprocity*

Based on my research and interviews throughout this summer it was found that reciprocity with partners is one of the major strengths of this project. There are no partnerships in which Young City Growers does not reciprocate the benefits it derives from the partner, and each of the partners I interviewed were very thankful for and positive about the relationship and the benefits they derive from being a part of Young City Growers. It is interesting to see the way that community level projects and organizations can derive benefits and make transactions that are not necessarily based on financial capital but that help each organization to achieve their goals and have a positive impact on the community.



This evaluation of the practices that Young City Growers’ uses as an emerging urban farm project to engage its partners and stakeholders has revealed some areas that provide opportunity to improve stakeholder relations, leveraging of resources, and overall success and sustainability. In looking to address the gaps in engagement that have been identified, it must be taken into consideration the small amount of financial and labour capacity available, which has been a barrier. Securing funding for these projects would be ideal, but I want Young City Growers to be able to move forward with this information to some degree whether the financial aid is there or not.

*Communications Role*

One of the most pressing takeaways from the interviews I conducted with the Young City Growers stakeholders was that there is a gap in communication that needs to be filled. This is not just to improve relations with stakeholders but to improve the way that Young City Growers puts itself out there into the community, as every stakeholder interviewed commented on how few people in the community actually know about the project. The creation of a communications role is something that could dramatically change the capacity of Young City Growers to grow, leverage resources, and create positive change in the community.

Redesigning the Young City Growers website would go a long way to improving the communication it have with its stakeholders, especially the CSA members and the broader community. A simplified design would provide simple access to information, and pages should be updated more regularly. This could be handled through the communications role as well.

## *Storytelling*

Along with improved communication, I believe that storytelling needs to be an important part of how Young City Growers moves forward and makes and maintains connections. To some extent, depending on from which partner the story is being told, Young City Growers is being represented in a lot of different ways. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and the pride with which YCG partners share the story is exciting and creates important opportunities for Young City Growers' profile to grow and for its the impact on the community to grow. I think it is important to take some control over the story, however, to ensure that there is no erasure of the project's background and its true missions, and that this began out of the African Community Wellness Initiative in order to positively impact multicultural urban youth and the local food system. It is important to know that the project is being accurately represented.

Having spoken to different people who have shared their food stories as well as how Young City Growers has impacted them, it could be an impactful way to share the Young City Growers story on social media by creating video stories or articles of the organization and of those involved with it. External representation, through news articles and story sharing is crucial to the community finding out about and understanding Young City Growers, but internally-sourced storytelling and representation has a lot of potential. This work could be done by volunteers or through collaboration with partners of Young City Growers.

The research and this case study were performed with Wilfrid Laurier University through a grant partnership with FLEdGE: Food, Locally Embedded, Globally Engaged and Young City Growers.

Visit <http://fledgeresearch.ca> or <http://youngcitygrowers.org> for more information.

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