

## Exploring community gardens on mental well-being among urban dwellers in Lagos, Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Purpose:* In Lagos, Nigeria, Rapid urbanization raises serious concerns about mental well-being due to limited green spaces and social isolation; hence, this qualitative study aims to investigate the experiences of individuals engaged in community gardens and their effect on mental health.

*Method:* This research uses semi-structured interviews with five individuals engaged in Lagos community gardens to thoroughly investigate their influence on mental well-being.

*Result:* The findings demonstrate an increased social connection, improved mood, and reduced stress, through nature contact, and gardening. Also, the findings review that community gardens contributed to overall well-being, provided opportunities for mindfulness, and physical activity, and facilitated a sense of belonging

*Conclusion:* The novelty of the research is that it sheds light on the specific experiences of Nigerians in community gardens and their perceived mental health benefits, thereby, pinpointing the potential of these spaces in tackling the urban mental health issues. This systematic study informs the development of culturally relevant community gardens as accessible interventions to enhance mental well-being in Lagos and similar urban settings.

**Keywords:** *community garden; mental well-being; social connection; stress reducti*

### INTRODUCTION

The ever-increasing population flow from rural areas to urban slum areas in developing countries like Nigeria presents an array of challenges that has impacted negatively on the psychological health of the inhabitants (Ayuba et al., 2023). Spatial planning is a characteristic process that inevitably leads to the loss of urban green areas that are considered very useful for the mental well-being and social interactions of people (Enssle & Kabisch, 2020). Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, faces two primary issues: concerns such as the unavailability of green spaces to people and the feeling of loneliness people face in their day-to-day endeavors. Due to these factors, cases of depression and anxiety were reported to have increased, as pointed out in Patwary et al., 2024)

One possible measure for handling this situation can be the incorporation of open-air cultivation facilities in the urban environment. Community gardening can be identified as public areas where people grow flowers and crops as one form of collaboration (Hou, 2017). Most of these gardens have been found to improve mental health because they help offer a medium of communication, boost moods, and help relieve anxiety (Gerdes et al., 2022). Although the general benefit of community gardening on peoples' mental health is well known, however, it remains a rather unknown area of research in the context of Nigeria.

Prior research conducted in other countries has established the potential of community gardens, yet, despite the increase in the number of studies and gardening initiatives across the globe, little systematic analysis exists about participants' experiences in practicing community gardening and understanding the perceived physical and mental health effects in African context particularly in Lagos Nigeria (Dipeolu et al., 2021). This study seeks to close this knowledge gap by examining the respondents' life histories of individuals associated with community gardening practices in Lagos and the influence of the environments on or their mental health.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do individuals engaged in Lagos' community gardens perceive the influence of these gardens on their mental well-being?
2. What aspects of community gardens in Lagos contribute to improved mental health among participants, and how do these experiences differ from individuals who do not participate?

This is a qualitative study and the research questions seek to find out the extent to which community gardens in Lagos impact participants' mental health. The study through case research of individuals engaged in community gardens will determine how those areas impact beneficial mental health. Meanwhile, the compare the participants knowledge with that of other individuals who are not involved in community gardening (Ramburn et al., 2023). The result will be applied to the creation of culturally appropriate community-wide garden interventions in Lagos and other similar cities where there are similar issues with mental health (Akindejoye, 2023).

Research carried out in the past has also outlined the Psychosocial costs of this uptake in to this rapidly growing urban centres such as Lagos Nigeria. Urbanization leads to the reduction of accessible green zones and social contacts thus contributing to depression and anxiety (Pasanen et al., 2023). Tomasso et al., (2021) has stated that lack of access to nature as well as lack of social connectedness is detrimental to one's health.

The study found that community gardens raised the social contacts of the subjects, enhanced their mood, and, thus, decreased their stress levels (Gerdes et al., 2022). In a study by Koay and Dillon (2020) community gardening activities were found to promote better life satisfaction and general well-being among working-age population in urban Lagos City. The physical activity of gardening comes with the following benefits; increases in mindfulness, positive mood and decreases stress (Gerdes et al., 2022). Furthermore, community gardens have a social aspect of meeting people and hence creates social relations (interpersonal related aspects) which creates a sense of togetherness among the people (Firth et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, most of the published empirical studies are based on the context of Western countries, and the attitude of community gardeners in Nigeria remains rather under-researched (Koay & Dillon, 2020) . This research intends to fill this gap through exploring the experiences of respondents dwelling in the community gardens in Lagos and their conception on mental health.

## **METHOD**

This study used phenomenological research methodology to understand the experiences of the community gardeners in Lagos, Nigeria, and how it influenced their mental health. Phenomenology aims at ascertaining the essential meaning of people's experiences or the sense they give to these experiences.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Population: purposeful sampling techniques were used to recruit the study participants, particularly people who gardened within the communities in Lagos. Participants were recruited through community organizations and conversations with garden coordinators. Only persons over 18 years of age, who are currently employed at a community garden within the Lagos area of Nigeria and who are willing to be interviewed were considered for inclusion in the study.

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from five volunteers with activities in community gardening in Lagos. An interview schedule consisting of open-ended questions was adopted to encourage the participants to express their views on mental health and the differences or similarities between them and non-participants. All the interviews were conducted with the permission of the participants and in English and their local languages to make them more natural and were digitally recorded and later transcribed exactly word by word.

**Data Analysis**

The thematic approach was used in the transcriptions of the interviews conducted. The analyzed data contained information to be assessed, primary codes, and major abstract concepts stemming from the participants' attitudes. The quality of the analysis was ensured by utilizing peer debriefing and creating a clear analytical trail.

**RESULTS****Connection with Nature**

In the study, the participants overemphasized the incredible benefits they derived from community gardening as a way of interacting with nature. One volunteer expressed this sentiment poignantly: "The garden helps me to feel that I belong to nature." For this reason, the garden acted as a spiritual overhaul, and several respondents' stress and anxiety levels have significantly decreased as a result of the intervention. Another respondent said, "It feels comfortable, easier, and more relaxed every time I am surrounded by plants and green areas. It relieves me of my stress and any tension that I have." These assertions resonate with literature on the rehabilitative qualities of nature (Stepansky et al., 2023)

**Stress Relief**

Most of the participants spoke of how community gardening helped in reducing stress. Through gardening, one could be able to exercise their body, and this played a big role in doing away with tension resulting from the stress of city life. One of the participants testified, 'Whenever I get stressed or under pressure, I sit in the garden and I become so calm.' Other participants expressed the same opinion noting that practicing gardening activities relieved their stress more than anything else. This result is in line with previous studies that have established the psychological well-being effects of exercise and contact with nature (Song & Lin, 2022).

**Sense of Achievement**

Another notable theme was the sense of achievement that participants got from gardening chores. Some participants noted they felt a sense of achievement and a reason for living when they could see the outcomes of what they did in the garden. One volunteer said, "It is like when plants grow and succeed because of me, I feel like I have accomplished something." The achievement felt by the volunteers was further boosted by the social context in which the activity took place and the

fact that everyone was planting for the same cause. Hence, this aspect of community gardening not only satisfied personal needs but also social necessities

### **Social Support and Community**

Thus, community gardening was not only a means of obtaining what people needed but also a place of belonging they lacked. The participants therefore underlined the role that social contacts in the garden assumed. Of particular importance, one of the participants said it like this: “I am sure, there is a sense of social support and community within the garden, people are ready to listen and to share their experience.” This had to do with overcoming the isolation that is characteristic of the urban living conditions. Gardening activities thus helped in efforts to promote increased mental health among the participants through the provision of emotional support derived from the sense of community (Koay & Dillon, 2020).

## **DISCUSSION**

Thus, the results of this study reveal several key areas in which community gardens can play a crucial role in the enhancement of the mental health of the growing population in Lagos, Nigeria. Such areas believed to be important are association with the environment, reduction of pressure, feeling of accomplishment, and support from other people. All of these themes correlate with extant research concerning the positive effects of greenspaces and group recreation on one’s psychological health. But unlike previous studies, this research advances the knowledge of such benefits about the Lagosian setting, thus shedding light on factors that may potentially affect these gains.

### **Connection with Nature**

The feeling of oneness with nature that was described by the participants supports the need to integrate the environment into the city layout of Lagos. The link has also been proven to lower stress and improve focus, which makes it a healthy remedy for the challenges that come with city life. As they reflect the health advantages of nature, this study pays much attention to the significance of Lagos where the lack of accessibility to green areas and the heavy influence of stress from over-urbanization has been well-established by Stepansky et al., (2023)

### **Stress Relief**

The fact that gardening can reduce stress suggests that the areas should be easily available for the residents to practice some basic exercises. Even in a state of high work load and pressure, gardening remains as an effective way to reduce stress as it is evident in this great city of Lagos. This discovery aligns with research works done on how physical activities and interactions with nature positively affect mental health, therefore pointing to the fact that community gardens may prove to be a tremendous asset to any urban mental health interventions (Song & Lin, 2022)

### **Sense of Achievement**

The idea of accomplishment that comes from community gardening underscores the importance of providing residents with meaningful things to do. Gardening holds a purpose and upon accomplishing the goal one feels satisfactorily, which is critical to one’s health. Social activities are also promoted by the above-stated communal exercises and this relieves on feelings of belonging hence enhancing mental health. Implications of these findings are that community gardens may present additional advantages beyond physical/nutritional; they may be therapeutically helpful for impoverished people’s psychological and social well-being (Ashton, 2015)

**Social Support and Community**

Such a high level of identified social support and social connectedness evidenced by the participants underlines the need to help people develop social relationships in the context of rapidly growing urban settings. Due to the social aspect of community gardening, residents are able to share experiences with fellow individuals within the community reducing instances of loneliness. This social kind of gardening is crucial in Lagos given that most people live in urban areas and may at times feel so isolated. The study indicates that community gardens are important platforms of human social interaction that positively influence people's well (Koay & Dillon, 2020).

**Integration with Existing Literature**

Past research has also shown the importance of green areas and collective spaces for people's psychological health, and this work furthers these observations by providing context to Lagos specifically. The situation in Lagos is that the people face specific urban issues, including the scarcity of green areas and high-stress levels, which makes the subject of community gardening especially significant. In this way, the current study enriches the literature on the impact of community gardens on mental health, shedding light on the above-stated contextual factors.

**Limitations of the Study**

These limitations include the small sample size that was used in the study, and the convenience sample set to only current users of community gardens. The research may not be generalizable to all the members of community gardens in Lagos or within other settings. Nevertheless, expanded research with culminating and disparate populations needs to be done to augment the generalization of results.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

**Increase Sample Size:** Review the sample by involving the non-participants, the participants who have left the program, and those who have continued with the program.

**Longitudinal Studies:** Look into the cumulative outcomes of being involved in community gardens on psychological health.

**Quantitative Measures:** Support primary findings with quantitative measures to assess the effectiveness of community gardening comprehensively.

**Policy and Planning:** Describe practices and responsibilities that public authorities, urban planners, and local groups have concerning the support and preservation of the community gardens.

**Environmental Conditions:** Investigate the best conditions under which the citizens would gain the maximum mental health boost from the activity, which is community gardening.

**CONCLUSION**

This research offers an understanding of the tenets concerning mental health among community garden members in Lagos, Nigeria. The outcome of the study suggests that community gardening has benefits and can be used successfully in stress reduction and for enhancing mental health among the population living in megacities. They have studies that show that people who engage in community gardening, achieve a lot of things such as a feeling of achievement, contact with nature, social support, and reduction of stress.

However, the authors pointed out some study limitations that imply further research to confirm and extend those findings. It therefore recommends that policymakers and urban planner should look at having community gardens included in the cities planning to improve the mental health of people in similar cities.

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