

Ecystation

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In 2009, two Bushwick residents who were active in the neighbourhood's community gardens decided to start an organization to open new farmers' markets. The founders were quickly hindered by a lack of funding and also sensed the community's needs for development and education about food, its need for jobs, and the need bridge between Bushwick's largely separate communities. As such, their initial goal of growing food was superseded by the vision of becoming an organization for education and community development. As we will see, the initiative has gone beyond the initial idea which inspired it. It has been effective in empowering young Latinos, has transformed social relations and is providing a new solution to the food needs of Bushwick's low-income community.

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We dove in heart-first... knew what we wanted to do, open some markets, and make it accessible, grow food, and open discussion about and around food (Ecostation, Executive Director).

Ecostation is neither a large coalition nor a huge organization emerging from grassroots. Rather, it is a socially entrepreneurial initiative launched by two 'social innovators'; it is a small social change organization working on the issue of 'food justice' and combining a global discourse with local practices at a community level.

Even though the founders of Ecostation were two newcomers to the area, they clearly aim to work with and for the local community in Bushwick. Their target population is the Latino community and they select the vegetables they grow according to the culture and tastes of the Latino community. Ecostation is, in fact, now a mixed organization where newcomers and long-term Bushwick residents work together.

We try to work with Make the Road and first generation immigrant families, because this is the majority of the people who live in Bushwick (Ecostation, Farm Manager).

The core aim of Ecostation is to address the issue of sustainability, prompting dialogue about the interconnectedness of human and environmental health, and the effects of our current food system upon both. In the span of just six short years, Ecostation has started several major, innovative, interrelated projects in Bushwick. First, a 'Campus Farm' (along with a greenhouse) was developed in Bushwick Campus High School. In the Campus Farm they grow organic food and also train the next generation of leaders with respect to environmental and food justice¹. Ecostation's purpose also speaks to the basic needs of the low-income Hispanic community. Their message is '*grow your own food to survive, and to make ends meet*'. Thus, they are teaching young people how to grow food, paying particular attention to Bushwick's low-income population and aiming to develop community leadership skills. This initiative is coordinated with the four high schools located at Bushwick Campus and the NYC Department of Education.

Second, Ecostation launched the Bushwick Farmers' Market, which aims to supply a community in need of fresh, local produce and to support the regional family farms that grow such food². Ecostation also provides organic food to the *bodegas*³ and aims to make this food

affordable. In this vein, Ecostation began accepting food stamps even before the city's farmers markets started accepting them. One interviewee stated:

A lot of these nonprofits tend to provide a sort of service. We also try to ensure that people who might not have the same resources as others are also participating (Ecostation, Director of Markets).

A third Ecostation project is Farm-in-the-Sky. This is a new project which is exploring traditional and experimental low-cost and scalable do-it-yourself technics at the rooftops⁴. Beyond these three main projects, Ecostation also carries out community events and is involved in local campaigns, such as a campaign to make healthy lunches available in schools.

Today, Ecostation is still a small organization in the formal sense: it has three part-time salaried staff and relies on 'farmer-educators' and on local public school administration (high school teachers and administrators from the host school campus), as well as on volunteer and student apprentices. Supportive relationships with the city's Department of Education are also valuable (it was the Department of Education that allowed Ecostation to set up its farm on the campus of a public school). The organization stands at the intersection of the three major sectors, with Ecostation itself being a nonprofit but one which collaborates with the public sector (public schools and the Department of Education) and which sells produce from both community gardens and for-profit upstate farms.

Ecostation approaches its work with a 'community building' philosophy. For instance, one farm manager shared his vision for how the organization can both use and transform the social fabric of the neighbourhood:

The community connections that you need for this project have always been there, you just need to take them and value them (Ecostation, Farm Manager).

With this community building philosophy, Ecostation has positioned itself in a creative position vis-a-vis the 'two Bushwicks' in that it contributes to integrating the two different cultures of, on the one hand, the gentrifiers and, on the other, the long-term Hispanic residents. For instance, millennials bring gardening knowledge and skills to the community, and volunteers and mentors are also enlisted from the gentrifiers; they then engage and train Latino young people, ushering them into a larger world of city-wide organizations and entrepreneurial practices. Ecostation is also sensitive to the tastes of the Latino residents, growing foods with respect to the Hispanic cultures of the long-term residents.

Structurally, Ecostation builds relationships across Bushwick's cultural divide, engaging both local artisans - who sell their crafts at the farmers' market - and neighbourhood *bodegas*. It partners both with organizations oriented toward the Hispanic community - such as Make the Road, el Puente, and RBSCC - and with the newer universe of gentrifying organizations - such as MayDay and BKRot - as well as with the public sector. In fact, more than perhaps any other organization we examined, what characterizes Ecostation is its position at the confluence of the two Bushwicks, for-profit organizations (upstate farms) and the public sector (schools and city agencies). The collaborative texture of Ecostation's leadership practices are



well suited to the organization's position at the crossroads between these various constituencies being bridged together.

Ecostation understands itself as an 'Educational Farm', with the objective of community building. They primarily train residents from Bushwick, although increasingly from other neighbourhoods too, to learn how to manage an urban farm, thereby accelerating the growth of the urban agricultural movement.

Operationally, Ecostation blends formal organizational elements (part-time staff, fundraising, training procedures, a small board of directors and physical sites) with an informal approach to its day-to-day organizing. With respect to the leadership continuum (from command-and-control at one end to collective leadership on the other) Ecostation falls near the collective end of the spectrum, though it is not without some elements of command-and-control; their three person staff and board influence decision-making throughout the different areas of Ecostation's activities. Ecostation exhibits many features of collaborative leadership, and principal-agent decision making coexists with self-consciously cooperative and consensus-based practices. Ecostation's philosophy of leadership stresses multiple decision-makers: '[t]here is no one person leading that', most of its members say. One Ecostation participant related:

We work together, different stakeholders, but separate, trying to learn from each other (...) We don't wait for an order. We say, ok, this is happening, how can we handle that collectively (Ecostation, Farm Manager).

When interviewing the leaders of Ecostation, we identified several distinctive aspects of the organization's leadership practices. As mentioned above, the most prominent of these was the way in which Ecostation is bridging differences between the 'two Bushwicks.' However, this is not the only practice we detected. We also found Ecostation reframing discourse through a universal food justice paradigm, holding the growing of food as simultaneously both a project for social justice and as economic development for the local community. Hence, Ecostation's scalability can best be understood in terms of its capacity to expand the relevance of the 'micro' activity of growing food on small plots of land into the 'macro' social justice issue of changing a system that works only for some into a system that works for Bushwick's Hispanic community:

The system doesn't work for a lot of people, so we want to change the system in a food justice way (...) This is not only about the food we eat but also about the environment we need. This affects all of us (Ecostation, Practician).

Thus, growing healthy food is presented as a project based on three rationales: a) it is part of a broader food justice movement; b) it seeks for endogenous economic development in a stigmatized local community; and c) it could find its own way to move forward autonomously. This new contestatory but pragmatic discourse is developed through Ecostation's everyday activities.

A clear example of how this discourse shapes Ecostation's practices could be seen in how the organization unleashes human energy. We found evidence of this occurring at



different levels: for example, knowledge regarding food justice, expertise in growing food and community leadership skills. It is training young people, and realising their potential is one of its main goals. Through youth workshops, Ecostation mentors connect a wide range of social justice movements together with food *'pointing out issues of class, gender, sexuality and race.'* At the same time, participants in Ecostation undergo the realization that growing one's own food is possible:

When you grow your own food... that realization for many people is unbelievable. Also connecting to your ancestors... A lot of them are third generation and it's fun to connect the food we grow to their cultures... (Ecostation, Farm Manager).

Ecostation intentionally engages in the development of youth leadership. As the Farm Manager says: *'we co-facilitate with new youth that are becoming community leaders, involving them in participation on the board.'*

In response to the effects of the Great Recession, Ecostation is notable for how its programs move residents, particularly young Latinos, from an underground, informal and illegal economy into the daylight of a legal economy: growing food and selling what they grow in the farmers' markets and to local restaurants.

Ecostation creates a public space [the Farmers Market] to sell products in a way that's legal and improves the health of the public (Ecostation, Director of Markets).

Ecostation brings larger neighbourhood social processes to bear on their work by hosting large-scale community events every year, and by providing job-training sessions for young people. Further, Ecostation's cross-sector organizational partnerships lead to young people becoming familiar with a larger universe of organizations, both in Bushwick and across NYC, thereby broadening their horizons and preparing them for entering into the city's employment network. Ecostation also strengthens the young people's ties to their schools, because the food they grow on the school campus farm supplies their school cooking classes.

In general, the activity of Ecostation's social entrepreneurs, who hail from the group of newly-arrived millennials, is oriented toward the established Latino community. These gentrifiers bring to the community their knowledge of gardening, their connections to organizations across the city and their financial resources. While providing training and mentoring for the local youth, they also understand their work in terms of constructing a model for others, aiming to encourage the development of similar types of organizations in other neighbourhoods across the city.

Is Ecostation proving effective? In 2014 they harvested 3000 lbs of fresh produce, managed a 12 000 ft² area of organic food production, grew 65 different crops, held 20 cooking workshops, hosted 20 visiting field trips, provided 2750 job training hours and staged three large-scale community events. Beyond the figures, by providing access to farm-fresh food from local farms and educating a new generation excited to learn about the crucial links between human and environmental health, Ecostation and their allies are helping build a healthier, stronger community. It would be premature, however, to evaluate Ecostation's



actual level of enlargement, which is more latent and potential than actual. However, it seems to be the case that their projects could easily be replicated in other parts of the city.

This socially innovative project shows us how some specific leadership practices - bridging differences between the two Bushwicks, reframing the food justice discourse and empowering young people – can result in a successful initiative, even in a context where social innovation is not prominent in the community. Ecostation is obviously related to its geographical context, but the features of Bushwick do not explain its emergence; Ecostation did not take advantage of Bushwick’s civic capacity but rather is probably helping to build civic capacity in the area.

In short, civic capacity is a community resource that can be created and built. Some socially innovative initiatives and some leadership practices can be highly useful for building that capacity. The creative and collective leadership practices we identified in Ecostation have not only made the initiative successful but are also helping to build a new form of civic capacity in the neighbourhood. Ecostation is bridging the two Bushwicks at the same time as engaging the opposed worlds of Make the Road and RBSCC. On top of that, Ecostation is working with state and city agencies. By pulling different actors together to work for a common neighbourhood goal the organization is fostering a process of civic capacity building.

Notes

- 1 The Campus Farm engages four high schools located at Bushwick Campus as well as MTRNY's Youth Power Project and Just Food's Farm School NYC.
- 2 The Farmers' Market engages local and regional family-owned farms, many from GrowNYC's New Farmer Development Project.
- 3 Bodegas are mini-marts or grocery stores run by Latinos.
- 4 This Project is carried out in partnership with RBSCC and MayDay.