Citizen networks in India’s Garden City: Protecting urban ecosystems during rapid urbanization

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Abstract

[This presentation would be part of the session "Urban environmental stewardship"].] Urban development implies considerable land use change and often disturbs existing ecosystem functioning including the benefits they generate for urban dwellers. Management of a city’s ecosystems is a complex task that can benefit from better integration with citizen initiatives for protection of urban greenery and public spaces. To better understand the challenges to organizing environmental stewardship in an urban landscape undergoing rapid change, we study the relations in a citizen network, referred to as "Green Life", in the city of Bangalore, India. Results from qualitative interviews and social network analysis display an informal and heterogeneous umbrella organization with a large but sparsely connected group of periphery members linked to a small but quite active core group. The network focuses its efforts on monitoring damage to fragmented urban greenery including parks, trees and lakes, and to raise public awareness about the consequences of unchecked and unquestioned urban development.

We further identify two key trade-offs that affect the activities of Green Life. In the first one – between inclusiveness towards members and efficiency in decision-making – the network’s emphasis on open and fair deliberations currently reduces the capacity for rapid collective action on controversial issues. Similarly, Green Life also favors democracy and transparency in addressing the tradeoff between internal and external legitimacy. Rather than building strong external alliances or entering collaborations with authorities, it strives to ensure equal participation for all members in the organization. These choices are based on norms rather than strategy, but they nevertheless have implications for the effectiveness of the group. Green Life’s core–periphery structure allows it to effectively communicate information and alerts, and provide skills and knowledge for members as well as local residents. Further, the network is able to bridge between multiple groups in a heterogeneous and dynamic urban population while also taking a confrontational stance to hold municipal authorities accountable. In protecting green spaces and articulating an alternative narrative about desirable urban development, these functions seem to be adaptations for the specific context of a rapidly transforming city like Bangalore.

Keywords: Community engagement, Governance, Social network, Stewardship, Trade-offs, Urban transformation