

# **Urban residents' perspectives on "green" low cost housing areas: an analysis of barriers to tree planting in South Africa**

## **Background**

Urban tree planting is considered a useful strategy in promoting sustainable cities. However, urban trees have been found to be unequally distributed both between and within towns. Previous studies have demonstrated the noticeable absence of trees in both the private and public spaces in South African government planned low cost (LCH) areas. In efforts to encourage tree planting in these suburbs, we designed a study that seeks to understand the barriers to, and possible solutions that can be explored to enable tree planting specific to LCH areas. In this regard, our research question ponders: What characterises a participatory learning model/s that is likely to be the most effective for the introduction and care of trees in low-cost housing suburbs in rapidly urbanising, small, South African towns? We aim to theoretically and practically evaluate existing or new participatory learning models to address barriers to and enhance enablers of residents' involvement in tree planting and care in low-cost housing areas in small South African towns. The specific objectives of this study include:

- Outlining the perspectives of residents from low-cost housing suburbs regarding the need for trees and their experience of planting trees
- Investigating the barriers to, and enablers of tree planting in low-cost housing suburbs from residents, experts' and municipal officials' perspectives
- Designing and testing means of engaging communities in participatory tree planting, and develop a participatory "guideline" to tree planting
- Introducing trees to low-cost housing suburbs using an effective participatory learning guideline

In addressing these objectives, we have conducted 800 household surveys in new and old LCH suburbs in eight small-medium sized towns, along with key-informant interviews with responsible municipal officials in these respective towns. Upon the identification of these barriers and possible enablers, we identified three towns within the sample of eight where there was demonstrated interest and potential for a sustainable tree planting culture to be cultivated. Subsequently, communities in Grahamstown, Matatiele and Tsolo were identified for the progression of the research. We have since been conducting focus group discussions around tree planting with these communities, accommodating both residents from the old and new LCH areas. The focus groups created spaces of decision-making informed by co-learning and knowledge-sharing between different stakeholders, but primarily bringing community members in the forefront. The first three objectives of this study have been addressed, and the research is now in the final stages where we are introducing trees to LCH areas through community engagement. This has been done recognizing that the introduction of trees in low-cost housing suburbs is desirable for the multiple benefits they provide, but requires the mobilisation of resources through multiple stakeholders, including municipal involvement, community participation, institutions of higher learning, and non-government organisations.

The presentation will focus on a part of the objectives, and as such cannot be submitted in isolation. Furthermore, this work is currently being prepared as a manuscript to be submitted for publication to the Urban Forestry and Urban greening journal. As such, we are unable to provide the full paper for fear of compromising the intellectual property of the work before it is submitted for publication.