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# The Importance of Urban Agriculture in Defeating Food Deserts

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### **The Importance of Urban Agriculture in Defeating Food Deserts**

I am examining the correlation between access to healthy, organic food and poverty. I'm looking into how food insecurity has become an increasing problem nationally and what America needs to do to rid communities of food deserts. Urban agriculture and urban gardening are some of the most important and crucial yet simple solutions to the food instabilities of the poverty stricken in America. Through my research I will uncover some of the reasons behind the lack of access to healthy food for a vast majority of America's population. I'm also interested in discovering various forms of solutions to this problem. How can we push and encourage ourselves as a society to begin to develop ways for the poor to have better food access? I want to find out why it is so difficult to access healthy foods and why better eating habits have not been a priority of the American culture.

These poor communities that suffer from food insecurity and injustices are predominantly minority groups. "A growing body of evidence suggests that local food environments in the US differ based on the racial and economic

composition of a community” (Freedman, 826). In these neighborhoods there are fast food places (Mc Donald’s, Taco Bell, Burger King, etc.), liquor and or convenience stores and limited, if any, supermarkets (Azuma, 3). If the corner stores sell fruits, veggies and other healthy types of food, they are extremely overpriced and not of decent quality whereas chips, soda and candy are of a much lower price. Convenience stores are a result of a racially infused and problematic past. “As grocery stores followed ‘white flight’ out of cities, they left small shops with few competitors with little room to expand to the retail size of their suburban counterparts. As a result of low competition, higher food prices, and the inefficiency of shipping fresh food into the city, prices increased but quality diminished. Inner city supermarkets have become inadequate for meeting the needs of low-income families”(Flachs, 3). Ultimately, supermarkets developed into businesses that left low-income and minority communities behind to suffer from the systematic oppression. City grocers raised prices or disappeared, creating what is known as the grocery gap or food desert where wholesome foods became completely inaccessible to low-income and minority communities.

Difficulties getting to supermarkets include poor transportation, high food prices and feelings of unsafety being out after dark (Azuma, 3). All these factors lead to hunger and poor intake of various crucial nutrients, leading to illness and diseases like obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart failure, strokes

and numerous kinds of cancer (Dziedzic, 30). There can also be disproportionate problems with alcohol and addiction because of the easy access at liquor stores. These poor communities are set up to develop failing immune systems and they lack vital and necessary access to any form of legitimate and positive resources. They've been thrown into an abyss of struggle, pain and hardship without any tools to escape. Low-income and minority populations have been surrounded by corporations that have completely shattered their wellbeing, leaving them with no choice but to struggle for survival.

If the amount of supermarkets increases in these areas, then it will positively impact the residents in the surrounding areas by creating an increase of food access and job opportunities. With higher food quality access and a growth in the job market, these low-income populations may have a chance to strive to create a prospering living environment. "Fresh food markets contribute to the overall health of neighborhoods and communities. Grocery stores are known by economic development practitioners to be high-volume 'anchors' that generate foot traffic and attract complementary stores and services like banks, pharmacies, video rentals, and restaurants" (Treuhaft, 19). The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative has pushed the upraise of supermarkets and other fresh food outlets in 78 food insecure urban and rural locations, resulting in almost 500,000 residents gaining access to healthier foods and the implementation of 4,860 jobs (Treuhaft, 20).

Over the past several decades, food production has fallen into the grip of a handful of global food corporations, creating an unfair amount of difficulties for small, local farmers to compete in the globalized industrialized food system that's heavily controlled by the "free" market. Industrialized agriculture is focused on high yields, productivity, efficiency and the ultimate control of all food systems through production of enormous quantities of raw agricultural, refined control of processing, distribution, and marketing that's imported and exported globally. Because of this mass production of food, local farmers in communities suffer from these corporations ruling the food system, creating "cheaper" prices and ruining the efforts of local farming while 33 million people in the America suffer from hunger on a regular basis (Dziedzic, 30). "This regime is controlled by a far-flung agrifood industrial complex made up of huge oligopolies including Monsanto, Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Conagra, and Walmart" (92, Giménez). Companies like Monsanto and Wal-mart have played a huge part in ensuring that local farming does not persist as they wield an immoral amount of power over food production.

Unfortunately, many food banks and charitable food organizations depend too much on unhealthy, processed foods that are coming from these large scale, corporate dominated food systems (Wurwarg, 79). It's absolutely necessary and imperative for cities to look deeper into the development of urban gardens and urban agriculture so that American people can maintain the right to eat vibrant foods that will nourish their minds and bodies instead of

decay them. When people are able to eat food that is grown closer to them, they will ultimately feel and look much healthier. “Urban agriculture reduces pressure on low-income residents’ limited family budgets while increasing the intake of much needed fresh fruits and vegetables” (Dziedzic, 27). If neighborhoods and communities throughout America are able to develop techniques to utilize urban farming, then communities can work together to provide substantial amounts of healthy foods for all. Logically, it makes more sense have communities growing their own fruits and vegetables instead of having these products mass-produced by large, corrupt and careless agriculture companies.

Many parts of these poverty stricken neighborhoods have plots of land and vacant lots that can and should be utilized to benefit the community (Rein, 75). Community gardens are a very beneficial part of the urban agriculture movement as they allow for local food to be grown and eaten, the potential for farmer’s markets springing up within neighborhoods and an overall increased amount of unity within these areas. “Gardens often host community events, provide safe spaces for children, and simply provide an opportunity for people to socialize with each other. By providing communal space they encourage interaction and sustain a community’s values. Older gardeners use the space to pass on farming techniques or recipes to younger members” (Flachs, 1). As the presence of gardening has proven to be so advantageous, perhaps it could also

be used as a tactic to reduce crime rates in poor communities. The level of communal involvement that comes out of gardening could have potential to be powerful enough to inspire those who have had a difficult past.

Luc Mougeot of the International Development Research Centre defines urban agriculture as, “an industry located within or on the fringe of a town, a city or a metropolis, which grows or raises, processes and distributes a diversity of food and non-food products, reusing largely human and material resources, products and services found in and around that urban area, and in turn supplying human and material resources, products and services largely to that urban area” (Koscica, 180). Urban agriculture provides people with ability to grow and access fresh foods that they might not otherwise be able to afford due to varying levels of poverty. Urban farming is a highly useful and sustainable way to ensure these communities are able to maintain a larger scope of foods containing micronutrients and necessary sources of health, creating quality diets for these people (Koscica, 179). Eating enough vegetables and fruits is a vital part of keeping people from getting many diseases (USDA Choosemyplate.gov, Why Is It Important to Eat Vegetables?)

While providing better fruits and vegetables to eat, urban agriculture also helps raise incomes through the sale of produce and by allowing people to not have to spend money on food that they would have had to buy without a garden within their community. “In low-income areas, particularly cities,

gardens have filled a necessary gap in fresh, healthy, and affordable food... Gardens enable communities to produce their own food at a fraction of the cost of produce in a supermarket” (Flachs, 3). In some communities of Cleveland, Ohio where urban gardens are successfully thriving, Community Support Agricultural (CSA) groups will join farmers to the consumers. The consumers pay for a portion of the CSA shares and meet up weekly to retrieve their produce from the farmers. This routine has proved to be highly economically reestablishing beneficial for the city farmer and the consumer as well as the land surrounding the gardens. “Not only can they transform a vacant lot into a community space and statistically reduce social costs, but evidence points to a positive relationship between proximity to community gardens and property value” (Flachs, 3).

Farmer’s markets are another successful and positive method to bringing communities together while also allowing low-income urban gardeners to gain profit from the fruits and vegetables they grew. In spring of 2009, fifth-graders at an elementary school in North Richmond, California began to hold a farmer’s market every two weeks with produce from their own campus urban garden. In 2009, they produced nearly 1,000 pounds of vegetables. Parents sent their children to school with requests for the produce their children participated in growing. Teachers integrated gardening into the curriculum and the students developed a deep understanding of the importance of locally grown foods.



“Richmond has been known for crime and violence, poverty and pollution since the postwar years when industry fled and malls destroyed downtown. But Richmond could be the most food self-sufficient urban community in the U.S.” (Rein, 76). The Richmond community and Verde Elementary School have excellently exhibited what urban gardening and agriculture truly ought to be. Regardless of the struggle and systematic oppression they suffered from, these individuals were able to unite to create a prospering and thriving environment through the success of urban gardening.

Urban agriculture is a crucial aspect to developing sustainable and equitable food systems and it will greatly contribute to the process of ending food insecurity. “As global food economy becomes further removed from life in cities, the opportunity is ripe for cities to encourage urban agriculture—an activity that alleviates food injustices by increasing access to healthy food and simultaneously improves many other economic, social and environmental conditions (Dzidzic, 31). The size and space available is not what’s important for urban agriculture to successfully work. What is crucial for consideration is the techniques used. “Hydroponic production is the cultivation of plants in water, sand, gravel or cinders. It is highly versatile and mobile since it does not require soil, and it is energy efficient since it is a closed, controlled system that allows for the reuse of water” (Koscica, 181). Hydroponic rooftop gardening produced three times more harvest than average farming techniques.

Developing countries have produced over 60 percent of their vegetables through the use of hydroponic agriculture. This displays how highly self-sufficient urban agriculture regardless of the land struggles that urban farmers may face.

The diets of communities can also mentally and emotionally contribute to their wellbeing and impact the relationships they have with one another. If people are forced to eat unhealthy junk food that causes them to become overweight and ill regularly, there will be a significant amount of unhappy and miserable community members. These relationships patterns will eventually be passed on and carried on by the younger generations and the cycle of unhappiness will continue. “A growing body of research shows that Americans, especially urban, low-income individuals, as well as people of color, have become disconnected from their food. Family dinners have been replaced by microwave dinners, home food with fast food, and markets with grocery store chains” (Flachs, 1). The food we eat has a very strong ability to influence us in either very positive or negative forms. All humans should have the right to food that makes them happy and positively contributes to their human existence. If humans are getting enough vegetables, fruits, nutrients and vitamins it will give them a level of energy and vibrancy that no fast food restaurant or frozen dinner could ever provide for them.

A vast amount of the schooling system within this society is another flawed aspect of American culture. In a majority of public schools (and private schools as well)—kindergarten through college—school participants are not taught quality education about food and eating. “For obese teens, the problem might be a lack of health education. A new study found that although 76 percent of obese teens have reported that they are trying to lose weight, their actions show that they might not be properly informed about how to make healthy decisions that will result in weight loss” (Carolyn, 1). America’s poverty system and obesity rate would be completely altered if people were taught about healthy eating and how to grow food from a young age in school. But this kind of education is too risky for the corrupt corporations that are making millions off of creating ill, obese and poverty stricken people while domineering centralized control of what happens in this country. If poverty stricken people were able to get educated about healthy eating and garden growing that would immensely bring a significant amount of positive direction into their lives. “Many health disparities in the United States are linked to inequalities in education and income... the highest rates of obesity occur among population groups with the highest poverty rates and the least education” (Drewnowski, 6).

The U.S. government and policy makers in these cities need to prioritize the concept of improving the communities with better access to supermarkets and urban gardening. There has been a fair amount of progression in various

cities to work towards some of these needs. “A number of Federal financing and incentive programs have been used to encourage new store development. These programs exist primarily to spur community development (not just supermarket development) in areas that lack mainstream investment” (Ploeg, 105). Higher quality supermarket options and the choice of having community gardens would truly mean equitable eating for all. Cities within America have many of the means necessary to implement these healthy food changes including land use planning, zoning, economic development and development and assistance (Treuhaft, 21). “Food issues are not in the realm of the urban built market, there is a insufficient federal funding, and a lack of knowledge about food systems (Dziedzic, 28).

Critics of the urban agriculture movement claim that there is not enough land in these urban areas and consider agricultural planning separate and obsolete to the modernistic planning of the city. “Most government agencies and urban planning departments do not designate any official land toward agriculture uses, and in certain cities the practice is even illegal” (Koscica, 180). The government and urban planning agencies must accept the depth and importance of urban agriculture because it may very well be one of the major solutions to America’s harsh poverty reality. If careful planning and consideration go into this culture of farming, then a large portion of food deserts can and will be solved. “All of these findings point to one conclusion:

communities that have no or distant grocery stores but nearby fast food restaurants instead - i.e. communities that are out of balance regarding healthy food options - will likely have increased premature death and chronic health conditions, holding other influencers constant” (Gallagher, 32).

Urban agriculture is absolutely logical because most cities have plots of land and vacant lots that are going unused. “Agriculture is not only the oldest but also the most important of humanity’s productive activities. It is the engine of rural employment and the foundation stone of culture, even of civilization itself... Today some 60 percent of the 4 billion people living in developing countries are still working on the land” (Shiva, 25). Why can’t these spaces be used to provide healthy food for the community? Unfortunately, America has never been a place that has focused on helping and bettering the lives of the poor or communities as a whole. The poor go unconcerned for and corporations like Monsanto make it extremely difficult for local agriculture and farming to become prospering.

Food and health are a vital part of creating a livable world for the following generations. Having access to fruits, vegetables, vitamins and nutrients is a human right. No person should be induced to being robbed of that right. The food system within America is utterly skewed and it is time people globally to pay attention to the reality of the planet’s conditions. Working to create a healthier America is a crucial part of standing and striving

for social justice and equity for all. If the human race can successfully learn how to grow and eat local foods, then we will develop into an improved civilization physically and mentally and we can then work to sustain our surroundings.