

Building Social and Community Capital Through Gardening in Ypsilanti, Michigan



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by

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ABSTRACT

Through their events, programming, and community partnerships, the Ypsilanti-based non-profit organization Growing Hope has envisioned a future of increased local food production, access, and sovereignty. By engaging in participant-observation in gardens and conducting interviews with staff, volunteers, and people involved in Growing Hope's programming and activities, I have learned how social networks go far beyond the confines of Growing Hope's programming. Communities, gardens, organizations, events, markets, fundraisers, and social gatherings create a network of support for local gardening and farming activities—or "civic agriculture"—in both urban and rural settings. This paper will be informed by a survey of current literature on the topics of urban agriculture, community gardening, and non-profit involvement in urban and collective agriculture projects in the United States. I will use insights from the literature in combination with ethnographic research to assess strengths and gaps in Growing Hope's vision, program implementation, and organization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When I first encountered the non-profit organization Growing Hope (GH) of Ypsilanti, Michigan, I was in my first year of graduate school, studying environmental justice at the University of Michigan. I was searching for a possible client for my masters practicum, and GH struck me as a perfect melding of my interests—social, economic and environmental justice and, of course, a love of gardening. Their activities include, but are not limited to, school learning gardens, a farmers market, a program where they install raised beds for low-income households and track their produce, an urban demonstration garden, youth internships, entrepreneurial training, and a network of support for community gardens in the city.

Among the many issues GH and I initially discussed for my research, tensions between ‘local food’ and ‘food security’ movements in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, and other post-industrialist cities in southeast Michigan such as Detroit and Flint were, to me, some of the most relevant and perplexing issues that do not seem to be addressed publicly by local food and urban food security organizations. One former GH staff member commented that environmental organizations tend to talk past one another, and that interactions often occur in politically charged settings such as county meetings (personal communication, 2010). One important question that I hope to address with my research is how do those supposedly being served by non-profit organizations perceive the programs that are implemented in their communities? Do individual and localized solutions to food access purported by these organizations resonate with heterogeneous communities of diverse backgrounds who perceive a variety of obstacles to eating healthy food?

On the organization’s website, GH describes its mission as “empowering local communities to grow and eat healthy food, (Growing Hope, n.d.)” The word “empowerment” always captures my interest because it is an ambiguous word; an advisor would remind me that, “There is no word for empowerment in either Spanish or Portuguese,” because the notion that someone else would empower you is irrelevant. One empowers oneself, and uses various resources to do that.

What, then, does this word mean in the context alternative food movements? How does an individual become empowered to change his or her consumption habits by growing

fruits and vegetables and eating healthier? These questions surfaced as I navigated my perceptions of the contradictory nature of non-profit efforts in the realm of local food and urban food security projects. It has been noted by scholars that social constructions of an 'alternative food movement' reflect an "agrarian imaginary" based on whitened cultural histories that use idioms such as the value of 'putting your hands in the soil,' or 'getting your hands dirty,' (Guthman, 2008, p. 435).

A look at the racialized history of agrarian land and labor relations in the United States—specifically the legacy of white land ownership and non-white labor—calls constructively into question the framing of "alternative" solutions to urban food security issues by non-profit organizations, with their emphasis on localism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement. Often these programs disregard structural limitations and cultural aspirations, and assume that the most significant barriers to healthy food access are knowledge, access, and cost. Despite pretenses of color or class related blindness, programs reflect the desires and values of their creators—oftentimes more so than those of the communities they serve. Such a challenge cannot be summarized and requires the examination of notions of "locally driven" or "bottom up" or "grassroots" motivations that drive social movements that are at once nuanced and radical.

It is not my desire to be unduly critical of non-profit involvement in local and alternative food movements. Instead I am considering the various constraints that operate in a competitive non-profit economy as the goals of urban food security projects are formulated, and how such complex processes can best reflect the interests of the communities they serve. Aspirations of empowering communities to overcome barriers to food security are well meaning, however utopian. Yet it is important to remember that urban decline in the post-industrial cities has been exacerbated not only by outdated "expectations of modernity" among members of labor forces and residential communities in transition, but also by neoliberal regulatory transformations that began in the 1980s, which downsized and decentralized public services and transferred these responsibilities onto individuals.¹

¹ James Ferguson's work (1999 and 2006) on related issues in international contexts addresses both these concepts, of industrial modernity and neoliberal governance among impoverished populations.

This brings to light another important point: it is possible that an insistence on local food systems as the 'alternative' solution could be misguided in circumstances where problems seem to call for more regulatory reforms, such as eliminating redlining, investing in urban renewal, expanding entitlement programs, obtaining living wages, and eliminating toxins from and improving the quality of the mainstream food supply (Guthman, 2008).

A different organizational approach to the problems associated with urban blight could be to focus on gardens primarily as an opportunity for social interaction and the building of neighborhood, citywide and organizational networks, rather than emphasizing the production aspect of gardens. Increased social capital and community development as a result of gardening have been thoroughly documented in scholarly literature on urban and community gardening. My research further supports these conclusions by analyzing interviews and personal communication with Ypsilanti community members as well as current and past GH staff members where a multitude of challenges and barriers to growing a garden successfully were revealed.

In this study I argue that in addition to all of the health and environmental benefits of eating fresh produce grown locally, having local food access and being involved in the local food process also offers benefits in the way of community and identity formation, the creation of a unique sense of place, as well as offering skill-training and a sense of responsibility that comes along with growing food—from sow to harvest. Community cohesion, identity, and sense of place, while difficult to measure, are all constitutive of what makes locally-based food production systems stand out in comparison to other methods of production. I have observed this in my own personal experiences, and it has also been documented in the literature on community garden programs and urban agriculture and/or gardens.

By engaging in participant-observation in gardens and conducting interviews with staff, volunteers, and Ypsilanti residents involved in Growing Hope's programming and activities, I have learned how social networks in the area help to reinforce one-another through volunteer events, fundraisers, and social gatherings. I have also been attentive to rationales for urban agriculture that are expressed through Growing Hope's mission statement as well as through the commentary of staff, volunteers, program participants and organizational partners. I have been especially perceptive of neoliberal tropes of individual

and collective responsibility within both urban agriculture projects and community garden settings. Growing Hope's programming does have an air of individual empowerment that can be associated with neoliberal ideology, however many garden projects in Ypsilanti exhibit a balance between grassroots collaboration and organizational support that make them particularly worth examining.

In the first section of my paper, I situate the current state of urban agriculture within major historical eras of urban and collective garden projects in the United States since the late 1800s. The next section is composed of a literature review on social capital and community development in urban and collective urban agriculture projects. The following section is composed of a case study that includes an in-depth ethnographic analysis of interviews and personal communications with past and current GH staff and Ypsilanti community members involved in GH's programming and activities.

This paper is informed by a survey of current literature on the topics of urban agriculture, community gardening, and non-profit involvement in urban and collective agriculture projects. I use insights from the literature in combination with ethnographic research to assess strengths and gaps in Growing Hope's vision, program implementation, and organization. In the conclusion section I will discuss some of the limitations of this study, as well as provide a summary of my findings with my own recommendations for Growing Hope's future undertakings.

2. A HISTORY OF URBAN GARDENING IN THE U.S.

Urban and collective garden programs have a long history in the United States. In fact, the history of urban agriculture in the U.S. starts in Detroit, Michigan, during an economic depression lasting from 1893 to 1897 (Lawson, 2005). In 1894, Detroit Mayor Hazen Pingree—who Lawson describes as “a controversial social reformist”—saw an opportunity to ease the pressures of unemployment and low wages on municipal agencies, charity, and philanthropic groups by inaugurating a program that would use undeveloped land throughout the city for potato cultivation by the poor (2005, p. 24). Despite initial skepticism, the program was surprisingly successful in its first year, supporting 975 participants and generating approximately \$14,000 worth of produce (Lawson, 2005). Other cities began to catch wind of Detroit's success with vacant-lot cultivation, with the

idea first taking root in New York and then in Philadelphia. By 1895, Vacant-Lot Cultivation Associations sprang up all over the country in places like Colorado, Wisconsin, District of Columbia, Washington, Tennessee, Kansas, Minnesota, and Ohio, to name a few (Lawson, 2005).

At the same time Vacant-Lot Cultivation Associations became a popular way to address unemployment and poverty, school gardens emerged as site for education as well as the improvement of physical health, where children were able to “work outdoors, with their feet in the soil, their heads in the sunshine and their lungs filled with good fresh air (cited in Lawson, 2005, p. 51).” Many of those who promoted school gardens during this time period justified them as an antidote to poor urban conditions such as crowded and cramped living conditions, trash-filled streets and vacant lots, and an inadequate number of parks. Advocates for school gardens framed these conditions were as harmful to the health and development of children, who became prone to crime and delinquency as a result of this environment (Lawson, 2005). There was also an element of socialization to school gardens, where children were taught appropriate social norms such as individual responsibility.

Like vacant-lot cultivation and school gardens, subsequent experiences of city-sponsored urban agriculture—including the Liberty gardens of World War I, the Relief gardens of the Great Depression, and the Victory gardens of World War II—were primarily in response to changing socioeconomic and demographic trends such as rapid urbanization, immigration, and economic depression (Lawson 2005; Pudup, 2008; Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004). These eras of gardening primarily focused on providing citizens with the tools to survive during economic and political crises, whereas more contemporary garden projects ranging from the 1960s to the present have been driven by a wider variety of influences, including the desire for open and “green” space, community development, activism on social and environmental issues, engagement in civic agriculture, and the use of horticultural therapy for individual growth (Milburn & Adams Vail, 2010; Pudup, 2008; Rubin Henderson & Hartsfield, 2009; Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004).

Pudup argues that rationales for community gardens began to shift in the 1980s in response to an era of “roll-out neoliberalism [when] community gardens experienced another resurgence as a countermovement against incursions of the market into social life

and the dislocations and disruptions produced in the market's wake (2008, p. 1230)." She uses the term "organized garden project" for the post-1980s community garden movement because, in addition the familiar rationales of the 60s, 70s, and 80s that identified gardens as a source a of collective empowerment, activism, and community development, organized garden projects of the past two decades are unique in that they incorporate tropes associated with neoliberalism, such as individual responsibility, individual change, and self-actualization (Pudup, 2008). Neoliberal rationalities resonate throughout many contemporary urban gardening activities along with other themes such as community development, the building of social capital, and the impacts of collective and/or urban gardening on both physical and mental health.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

REDEFINING THE FOOD SYSTEM

Propelled by the emergence of the Green Revolution in the 1940s, conventional agriculture in the United States has followed the trajectory of industrialization and globalization. As a result, mechanized, mass-producing, and mass-distributing multinational corporations supply much of the food in the United States and abroad. As agricultural practices in the United States have modernized and industrialized, they have also regionalized as farmers are driven to exploit their comparative advantage by maintaining niches in production (Lyson, 2004). Lyson states, "The emerging configuration of agriculture and food production in the United States and the world has been guided by an economic development paradigm grounded in neoclassical/market based economics (2004, p. 3)." Farm operators who espouse this view emphasize the "production function," which describes the economic sustainability of agriculture in terms of balancing land, labor, and capital. In addition, these farm management professionals have emphasized substituting capital, such as machinery and chemicals, for land and labor (Lyson, 2004).

Increasingly U.S. citizens are seeking alternatives to the conventional food system by collaborating with local farmers, businesses, non-profits and governmental agencies to localize food production through ventures such as farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and grower-buyer cooperatives. Lyson uses the term "civic agriculture" to describe "the emergence and growth of community-based agriculture and food

production activities that not only meet consumer demands for fresh, safe, and locally produced foods but create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, and strengthen community identity (2004, p. 2).” The goal is not only to keep the circulation of capital local, but also to educate and inform citizens about more environmentally and socially sustainable food production systems as well as proper nutrition. Civic agriculture characterizes a wide variety of projects, however in the following paragraphs I will focus on both urban and community gardening activities. An urban garden is not necessarily a community garden and visa versa, however the two activities have developed in tandem in the United States and therefore reveal a wealth of information when compared and contrasted.

URBAN AGRICULTURE AND COMMUNITIES

Some scholars have noted that the term “community garden,” while widely recognized, imposes limits on how garden projects are able to define themselves, and can also perpetuate assumptions that community gardens have only one distinct manifestation. One common perception is that of “the neighborhood garden in which individuals have their own plots yet share in the garden’s overall management (Lawson, 2005, p. 3).” Instead Lawson uses the phrase “urban garden program,” because the term “encapsulates various cooperative enterprises that provide space and resources for urban dwellers to cultivate vegetables and flowers.” Also, “The broader category *urban garden* can include more types of programs, such as relief gardens, children’s gardens, neighborhood gardens, entrepreneurial job-training gardens, horticultural therapy gardens, company gardens, demonstration gardens, and more (Lawson, 2005, p. 3).” From Lawson’s point of view, an urban garden program may or may not be community-based—it is simply an umbrella term that references communally cultivated gardens from different locations in history, formed in response to a specific need, and designed with varied intentions.

While many people think of community gardens as “the epitome of grassroots activism,” Lawson points out that many past and present projects have been developed from the top down (2005, p. 297). With this in mind, the term “community” in the phrase “community garden” can seem misleading, since many urban garden programs “rely on a network of citywide, national, and even international sources for advisory, technical, financial, and political support (Lawson, 2005, p. 3).”

Smit and Bailkey re-appropriate conventional definitions of community and point out that communities come in a variety of forms, such as “communities of interest (belief, cultural background, football, golf, learning), communities of circumstance (race and ethnicity, disabilities, prisons, orphanages), and communities of place (cities, villages, gated communities, refugee camps, Wall Street) (2006, p. 146).” While members of each of these communities recognize the commonalities that link them together, they do not see themselves as separate from the rest of urban society (Smit and Bailkey, 2006). From this perspective, communities are defined by a “common ground” that is shared—and this commonality may or may not be chosen by a community’s members.

While urban agriculture is typically viewed as a welcome addition to the global food system in richer countries, many city dwellers in developing nations lack the access and income required to participate in the global economy, and so they depend on urban agriculture as a major supply of meats, fruits, and vegetables (Smit and Bailkey, 2006). Regardless of the socio-economic status of the country in which urban agriculture is practiced, Smit and Bailkey argue that

Certain forms of urban agriculture display a social organization that focuses on creating stronger urban communities. These activities reflect a grassroots understanding of local needs and skills, and link this to a complimentary understanding of the multiple functions of urban agriculture in a way that, when successful grants participants a sense of shared accomplishment in how the methods and results of food production and distribution translate into something more encompassing. We call such activities *community-based urban agriculture* (2006, p. 146).

Lyson’s definition of civic agriculture and Smit and Bailkey’s concept of community-based urban agriculture share understandings of the multiple purposes of urban agriculture in general, and place-based identity formation in particular. To these authors, a truly local and civic-minded agriculture is present where communities are formed at the grassroots level and work collectively to “create a framework for involvement and inclusion connected to the sharing of space over time (Smit and Bailkey, 2006, p. 147).” While place-based communities are common in the practice of urban agriculture, it is not a requirement. In fact, community-based urban agriculture is not scale-dependent, meaning that a “community” could be an entire city or a whole neighborhood. “In practice, however, CBUA works well when it builds upon the initiator’s cognitive understanding of a particular

community...to which the project can be tailored and the benefits appropriately directed (Smit and Bailkey, 2006, p. 147).” Central to both concepts is the ability to provide opportunities for social interaction, which is a key attribute of any thriving community (Smit and Bailkey, 2006).

Pudup uses the term “organized garden project” to “draw a distinction between the postwar ‘community gardening’ era when organized projects could be construed as social resistance and the more recent projects animated by an ethos of individual responsibility (2008, p. 1229).” The phrase “organized garden project” leaves the act of defining a garden project up to its members while avoiding debates over the meaning of the term “community.” The phrase, according to Pudup, creates “conceptual space for some garden projects to organize themselves around principles of community enunciated by the group. Put differently, the concept allows for community but does not mandate or assume its existence (2008, p. 1232).” Her definition of an “organized garden project” differs significantly from Lyson and Smit and Bailkey’s community-based models of growing food. Instead, she states

the rise of gardens as organized projects [were] specifically designed as spaces of neoliberal governmentality, that is, spaces in which gardening puts individuals in charge of their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation through self-help technologies centered on personal contact with nature...Change in persons through their individual plant cultivation takes precedence over any transformation that might ensue from people working with and/or beside other people (Pudup, 2008, p. 1228, 1230).

I argue that, while many contemporary garden projects exhibit neoliberal themes in their programming, themes of place-based community development, activism, and the building of social capital provide a counterbalance to neoliberal motifs. In other words, urban garden projects can support individual as well as community-wide development. The abovementioned typologies of urban agriculture activities—urban garden program, organized garden project, community-based urban agriculture—suggest that the details of urban agriculture activities vary significantly depending on variables such as organization, management, membership, and community involvement. In turn, these variables affect how projects are able (or unable) to reach community development goals and build social capital.

GARDENS AND COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Participation in community-building activities, such as community gardening and neighborhood associations, have been found to increase networks and social capital, especially in low-resource neighborhoods (Armstrong, 2000; Milburn and Vail, 2010; Smit and Bailkey, 2006; Twiss et al., 2003; Wakefield, 2007). Dialogues surrounding the definition of social capital are lively and ongoing. For the purposes of this paper, I define social capital as investments people make in relationships that can bring about tangible changes for groups and/or individuals (Alaimo et al., 2010).

Alaimo, Reischl and Allen's study on community gardens, neighborhood meetings and social capital in the city of Flint, Michigan found that, "Having a household member participate in community gardening/beautification and/or neighborhood meetings was associated with more positive perceptions of bonding social capital, linking social capital, and the existence of positive neighborhood norms and values, (2010, p. 510)." Additionally, they argue that, "social capital is likely built neighbor by neighbor through investments that individual residents make in spending time with their neighbors and improving their neighborhood (Alaimo et al., 2010, p. 511)." The authors found that existing neighborhood organizations play a facilitating role, "ensuring that collective action on community gardens or beautification led to increased social capital" and that participation exhibited in both neighborhood-level organization activities and individual-level gardening and/or beautification activities was "a stronger predictor of bonding social capital, linking social capital, and feeling responsibility for the neighborhood" than was participation solely in individual-level activities (2010, pp. 499, 510).

Armstrong (2000) observed that social networks and increased organizational capacity of neighborhoods resulting from community gardens exhibited social support, emphasis on informal networks, and community organizing, which are key attributes for health promotion in minority communities. Furthermore, she argues that her study is consistent with community organization models that emphasize the "interrelatedness of individual social support, group social networks, and community empowerment," and are related to "ideas of 'social cohesion' and 'social capital,' which have been associated with public health (Armstrong, 2000, p. 325)."

In their study on urban health and community gardens in South-East Toronto, Wakefield et al. concluded that, "Community networks and social support were developed through the gardens. The gardens were seen by many as a place where communication with people from other cultures could begin, using food and shared experience as a starting point for understanding (2010, p. 100)." Similarly, Milburn and Vail state that, "Perhaps the most widely publicized benefit of community gardens is that they aid in creating a sense of place and fostering community pride in neighborhoods...Having a space where neighbors can meet and socialize increases social networks within the community...Social networks, community, and sense of place are key elements of social capital (2010, p. 72)." Indeed, the importance of creating opportunities for socialization and networking comes up repeatedly in literature about building social capital, as does the role of social capital in creating civic pride and sense of place.

Community development is another prominent theme that is characteristic of contemporary community gardening movements, versus earlier movements that focused primarily on food production (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004). It is related to but distinct from social capital. Lawson defines community development as "a broad term that encapsulates a variety of social, economic, and physical improvements meant to empower a neighborhood or group so it can advance itself (2005, p. 294)." Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny state that community development "refers to community members analyzing their own problems and taking action to improve economic, social, cultural, or environmental conditions, as well as feeling part of and identifying with the community as a whole (2004, p. 400)." On its website, the American Community Gardening Association addresses the link between gardens and community development:

"The Association recognizes that community gardening improves people's quality of life by providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets, conserving resources and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education (American Community Gardening Association, n.d.)."

It can be posited that community development is the sum total of the many physical, environmental, and social benefits that have been documented throughout the literature over the past several decades on urban and community gardening activities. For community development to be successful, current community needs must be addressed as well as larger social and economic forces that are outside of the community's control and inhibit the self-actualization of development goals (Lawson, 2005). One reason building social

capital is important for community development is that it connects networks of individuals who are then able to identify and prioritize issues collectively. Secondly, increasing social capital connects communities of interest, circumstance, and/or place with organizations that can help address some of the large structural challenges that these communities face. As mentioned previously, a network of governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as national and international donor agencies often support urban garden programs by providing technical, political, and financial guidance (Lawson, 2005).

Milburn and Vail (2010) list community development has one of the “seeds of success” that should be included in the design of successful community gardens. They argue that, “community development potential does not necessarily happen *once* a garden is started; rather, it depends on *how* the garden is developed (Milburn and Vail, 2010, p. 79).” They emphasize the importance of building positive relationships among gardeners, the immediate neighborhood, and the larger community as well as connecting communities to a larger network of community groups and organizations (Milburn and Vail, 2010). They include organizational structure as a component of community development, and they identify two aspects of garden organization that are important for community building, which they call “the overarching organization and the internal organization (Milburn and Vail, 2010, p.80).” The overarching organization must be driven by the “needs and goals of the community,” so that gardeners can “concentrate on the purpose and focus of the garden while effectively utilizing the resources and services of partnership organizations (Milburn and Vail, 2010, p. 80).” Internal organization, on the other hand, may use different organizational arrangements to make day-to-day decisions and it reflects the decision-making preferences of garden members. For example, some gardens elect their leaders while others focus on broad-based decision-making (Milburn and Vail, 2010). In sum, “A structured organization provides a framework enabling gardeners to have a voice and helps ‘promote stability, trust, and a foundation for growth’ (Milburn and Vail, 2010, p. 80).”

Smit and Bailkey emphasize the relationship between community-based urban agriculture (CUBA) and community development, however they point out that CUBA is the result of a process that is more participatory than traditional community development agendas. They define seven dimensions of community capital adapted from community development and sustainability studies in the United States, and they argue that, for an urban garden program or community garden to be considered a true CUBA activity, “It is essential to identify each of these dimensions and bring them into focus for the community

and for outsiders in order to conceive, design, and implement community building projects (Smit and Bailkey, 2006, p. 151).” The dimensions are as follows:

- Human Capital: the health, education, and skills of the individuals involved
- Social Capital: the strength of groups, networks, a common vision among members, and the creation of bridging networks across different groups
- Political Capital: the dynamics of group organization and leadership, and relations with government and supporting agencies
- Cultural Capital: the values and heritage of the community, and the celebration of such
- Economic Capital: the investments, savings, contracts, and grants
- Built Capital: the physical settings—land, housing, other buildings, infrastructure
- Natural Capital: the local air, land, water, biodiversity, scenery, (Smit and Bailkey, 2006, p. 151).

Social and cultural capital are two dimensions that clearly differentiate CBUA from standard development practice because of their role in encouraging social cohesion and bridging social networks. As a result, CBUA has the ability to improve community food security as communities obtain sense of ownership over their local food system. Often this “leads to a collective sense of empowerment with those involved thinking better of themselves and their neighbors and being proud of their shared accomplishment (Smit and Bailkey, 2006, p. 152).” In the following case study, I will use the ideas of social and cultural capital and community development to analyze Growing Hope’s organizational approach, which emphasizes the ability of individuals to address food insecurity by growing their own food.

3. CASE STUDY: YPSILANTI, MICHIGAN

THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF GARDENING

As I walked up to my community garden plot, which I had been dotting on lovingly since early May, I was utterly shocked and dismayed by what I saw. A recent series of thunderstorms had resulted in an unusually large amount of precipitation in a short period of time. Not only was my plot flooded, but my beloved tomato plants were on the brink of death, green fruits and all. All five species, heirlooms that I had spend many devoted hours pruning and watering during the hot summer days were nothing but yellow and wilted versions of their former selves. First came Joan², whose garden was also damaged, and

² Names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

together we lamented our dying tomatoes. Then came John, whose plot was right next to mine and completely intact. “Just look at my plot!” I exclaimed. John, a returning member, was aware of the flooding problem and had constructed his plots in a way that prevented them from suffering the same fate as mine and Joan’s, who were both first year members. John assured us that all was not lost, and that the existing fruits may still have a chance to ripen, although the plants may react to the stress by no longer producing new fruit. He asked me if I would garden in that plot next year, and he offered advice on how I could prevent flooding from happening in the future by improving the drainage of my plot. His advice was somewhat uplifting, and I was glad there were others in the garden that evening that I could share my concerns with. Then I remembered something that Jennifer, our garden steward, had said to me in an interview when I asked her what she would remember most about her experience as a member and organizer of the Normal Park Community Garden (NPCG):

To me, like I said, the most important part is the community aspect. For me, I could leave my weedy plot at any moment and not look back—actually I do have sentimental attachment, but it’s the community part. I feel like even if I were to stop growing plants tomorrow, I would still have this network of people that I know and a network of friends that are tied to the garden but also can leave this physical place and that is super cool (personal interview, July 12, 2011).

While my droopy tomatoes were certainly a disappointment, I remembered how I had learned from and shared experiences with others in the garden in a way that I could not have otherwise. Surely our flooded plots will be another story to add to the learning experience of the NPCG. Even as a relatively young community garden established in 2005 with the help of GH and other local Ypsilanti organizations, the NPCG has its share of stories that are a testament to both the challenges community gardens face as well as the benefits that come along with success. My story, however, is indicative a major challenge inherent to food security approaches to urban agriculture projects, and that is the unpredictability of gardening. As an organic farmer told me at the market one day, “Farming always involves an element of luck (personal communication).”

METHODS

For this study I conducted six informal, semi-structured interviews that lasted between thirty and sixty minutes apiece. Two interviews were with program staff involved with Growing Hope's Raised Bed Program, as well as two volunteers and one participant involved with the program. These interviews were conducted between November and December of 2010. Since the summer of 2010, I have engaged in participant observation at many of Growing Hope's events, including potlucks, farmer's markets, and volunteer events at the Growing Hope Center. Since May 2011 I have been a member of the Normal Park Community Garden (NPCG), one of many Ypsilanti neighborhood gardens that Growing Hope helped create and still maintains a supportive relationship with. My role in the NPCG has been that of member as well participant observer, and I conducted a lengthy interview with our garden steward to learn about the garden's history and relationship with Growing Hope. The insights I gained through personal communication and my role as a volunteer, participant-observer, interviewer and member of the NPCG will drive my analysis of some of the key strengths and gaps in Growing Hope's vision, implementation and organization.

BACKGROUND

The city of Ypsilanti is located directly southeast of Ann Arbor, Michigan, however its population of 19,435 is merely one-sixth the size of Ann Arbor (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Both cities are home to educational institutions—Ann Arbor to the University of Michigan and Ypsilanti to both Eastern Michigan University and Washtenaw Community College.

The major difference between the two cities aside from size and population is income. In 2010, the average median household income of Ann Arbor was 55,632 dollars, while Ypsilanti's was 30,378 dollars (the average for the state of Michigan was 53,201 dollars) (CLRSearch.com, 2010). This income gap is reflected in the local food activities of each city respectively.

Both cities are now known for their farmers markets, community gardens, and lively non-profit sector activity related to sustainable, organic, and local food. However, while Ann Arbor's local food advocates tend to focus primarily on supporting the local economy and eating organic, Ypsilanti's local food advocates tend to focus on food security—a theme that

receives little attention in Ann Arbor where food security is perhaps perceived as less of an issue.

GROWING HOPE

GH became a federally recognized 501c3 non-profit organization in 2003, however their work first began in 1999 when founder Amanda Edmonds along with the University of Michigan student Environmental Justice Group established a garden at the Perry Child Development Center on the south side of Ypsilanti (Growing Hope, n.d.). Since its creation, Growing Hope has been dedicated to “helping people improve their lives and communities through gardening and healthy food access (Growing Hope, n.d.).” Their approach to local food advocacy focuses on increasing food security of low-income communities, particularly in the city of Ypsilanti, however they do offer certain programs for Washtenaw County and the residents of neighboring counties. On their website, they outline their approach to improving food access for local residents:

Growing Hope is firmly rooted in neighborhoods where access to healthy food and economic opportunity has previously been in short supply...Residents of Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, and from across Washtenaw County come together, every day, to do the work that has helped Growing Hope become a nationally recognized contributor to increasing access to fresh, local produce for underserved populations. We rely on our strong community ties to individuals, small businesses and local government throughout Washtenaw County, and especially in Ypsilanti to help us serve our mission and make progress (Growing Hope, n.d.).”

GH’s programming has expanded beyond school learning gardens and now includes a variety of initiatives. Their Growing Gardens Program provides support to home, school, and community gardens in Washtenaw County by “providing start-up training, education, and resources that help people grow their own food (Growing Hope, n.d.).” They operate a farmers market in downtown Ypsilanti that connects local businesses, growers, and consumers, and they engage in social enterprise with a demonstration urban market garden, which they harvest and sell at the farmers market in addition to raised bed kits and seedlings early on in the growing season. They also have a Youth and Schools program, which includes in-school and extracurricular opportunities for youth, and a Community Outreach Program, which includes participation at community events and fairs.

These programs are part of a larger process that extends beyond the boundaries of GH's programming. This process is the building of social capital that networks local communities, businesses, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. With these linkages, communities are able to build up their capacity to have successful community-based urban agriculture endeavors, as well as maintain a broader network of support so that residents feel empowered to take up other pressing issues in their communities.

Below I discuss the diverse partnerships that are required for the success of local food initiatives to take hold and make a difference in communities, particularly in the realm of building community and social capital. GH as well as Ypsilanti communities, businesses, and governmental agencies provide a model for collective engagement in local food production and civic agriculture. In the following paragraphs I will use interviews from GH staff, volunteers, and program participants to do an in-depth analysis of the perceived impact of GH's programs on some of Ypsilanti's residents. Their insights reveal the heterogeneity of the communities served by GH and their differing perceptions of and responses to GH's programs.

THE NORMAL PARK COMMUNITY GARDEN (NPCG)

The NPCG is one of several community gardens in Ypsilanti. The first community garden in the Normal Park neighborhood, called the Rec Park Community Garden, was established in 2004 and is located behind the Ypsilanti Senior and Community Center. A member of the community, who works at the Washtenaw County Health Department, was working on a healthy eating campaign at the time that got her to thinking about establishing a place to garden in the community. The community member went to the local non-profit GH, which was known for successfully establishing other school-based garden programs in the area, to ask for help organizing the garden.

GH initially assisted with the creation of the Rec Park Community Garden by officially requesting land from the city. A local initiative called Ypsilanti PRIDE (People Restoring Image and Developing the Environment) also played a significant role in establishing the garden by including it as a site for their annual volunteer event where, for one day in May, hundreds of community volunteers assist with neighborhood beautification and trash pick-up at a number of pre-selected sites. Additionally, the Normal Park Neighborhood Association backed the garden because of their role in managing the

Ypsilanti Senior and Community Center. As a result of this collaboration between Ypsilanti organizations, residents, and neighborhood volunteers, the Rec Park Community Garden was built in 2004. It exceeded capacity within days of opening its membership to the public, Jennifer (personal interview, July 12, 2011) explained, “And so we knew right away that was going to be the only year that we would remain as one garden around here and that we had to quickly find more space.”

In the next year, 2005, GH again helped to negotiate the use of land behind a school that was at the time named West Middle School, but recently changed its name to Ypsilanti Middle School. At the same time GH was helping to negotiate the use of land for the NPCG, they were doing the same for another community garden called Midtown. Upon the establishment of the new gardens, half of the gardeners left the Rec Park Community Garden for the NPCG, while a quarter went to Midtown. Again, Ypsilanti PRIDE and the Normal Park Neighborhood Association assisted with the organization and construction of the gardens.

Interestingly, Jennifer (personal interview, July 12, 2011) described Ypsilanti PRIDE in a way that resonated with neoliberal themes discussed earlier in this paper: “...it’s really like a grassroots kind of thing, and it’s kind of making up for where city services lack or don’t have the funds, especially with parks.” Indeed, many community garden projects are seen as an attempt to make up for gaps in city, state, and federal services. In this case, Jennifer was describing the building of the garden in this light, rather than the garden itself, however her observation sheds light on how Ypsilanti community members perceive the capacity of municipal organizations versus community groups and non-profits in maintaining a healthy and visually pleasing environment.

Jennifer described how GH’s involvement early on in the process of organizing the gardens was significant:

Growing Hope was really instrumental in getting this land, because I think had we just been a loose organization of interested community members, [the school] may not have gone for it. But because Growing Hope was a recognized name in the community and because they had had a series of successful gardens at school sites...I think that’s what gave us the credibility to get the school to agree. So in that way Growing Hope was very instrumental in getting us this land. They’re always in our back pocket should we need them (personal interview, July 12, 2011).

Jennifer's descriptions reveal the resourcefulness of the Normal Park community, and she positioned GH as one resource among many that empowered Normal Park residents to organize and establish community gardens.

GROWING HOPE'S RAISED BED PROGRAM

The Raised Bed Vegetable Garden Program falls under GH's program category Growing Gardens. The program serves low-income households that apply for and are accepted into the program. GH staff and volunteers install up to three 4x4 raised beds per household and provide educational workshops, technical support and networking opportunities for participants. In exchange, participants are asked to help measure the impact of the program by weighing and tracking how much is grown in the garden space, completing a survey in the spring and fall, and attending one class during the year (Growing Hope, n.d.).

In 2010, the programs second year, raised beds were installed for 38 low- and no-income households in the Ypsilanti area. According to the data collected by GH, "66% of these families had children, 25% had a senior head of household, and 40% of families received food stamps, and 42% utilize food banks (Growing Hope, n.d.)."

After the 2010 program ended, I conducted two interviews with staff in charge of the program, two interviews with steady volunteers, and one interview with a program participant. From the five interviews, recurring themes emerged that include ideas about community, knowledge and empowerment, sense of place, and increasing healthy food access. My initial observation was that people with different roles in the program tended to talk about these ideas in much different ways. Indeed, diversity of opinion has the potential to make social movements more resilient. However, I argue that, for GH's purposes, it is important to clearly define the intent of programs so that participants, volunteers, and staff can set appropriate expectations. Using interview notes and transcripts, I will provide examples the broader visions of Program staff and the more immediate perceptions of program participants and volunteers.

When asked about the goals of the program, staff members cited increasing food security, enabling and empowering communities, building skills and capacity through gardening, and increasing access to healthy food. Andrea, a social work graduate student intern who was responsible for running the 2010 summer program, differentiated the

Program from the typical “hand-out” characteristic of charity, stating that the fundamental difference is that Growing Hope is not giving away raised beds, but that they expect a return in the form of pre- and post-surveys, as well as monthly reports on amounts of food harvested (personal interview, 2010). She talks about the expectations for interactions between Growing Hope staff and Program participants in terms of “participatory research,” an approach familiar among social workers in community organizing. Andrea explains her ideas about the participatory research approach in the context of the Program:

We are doing an exchange with you. We are not giving you this. Your role in this is to participate and to give us feedback so we can improve this program and to quantify what we can do in this community...you are participating in your community, you are enhancing your community by having this, and by doing this, and by demonstrating to your neighbors and people in your community that we can improve community food security through doing this (personal interview, 2010).

For Andrea, it is important that gardeners in the Program understand the nature of their participation, and are willing to put forth significant efforts in the growing and data collection process.

In contrast with Andrea’s description of the Program as organized around the model of participatory research, Sam, a lead volunteer, related the Program to charity. When asked about the strengths of the Program, Sam said:

It’s not just like a humiliating type of charity. Charity, the way I think of it, is like kind of embarrassing for both sides, but it’s like teaching how to fish instead of giving the fish. It sustains itself, I guess. And it’s fairly humble in its design, I guess. It’s not like lording charity over anybody (personal interview, 2010).

While Sam may be using the word charity to describe the intent of the Program, it is clear that he values the skills that could be gained through growing and consuming one’s own food in a sustainable way. It is possible that Sam is relating charity with, “helping people,” which he mentioned a couple of times in his interview, and that he is not necessarily thinking about charity strictly in terms of the “hand-out” model that Andrea used in contrast to the participatory research model. Still, there is a significant difference in the way that Sam saw the Program functioning and the goals that Andrea put forth. When asked about the main goals of the program, Andrea said:

I think one of the primary goals is increasing community food security, and I think Growing Hope does that in different ways. Specifically they focus on doing it in ways that it's enabling and empowering people to have the skills to do that within their own community. So it's not like a more traditional "hand-out" style. It's not like, "Here, I'm giving you these carrots," or whatever. It's empowering people to do that for themselves and to build capacity in the community. That's another one of the goals, to build that capacity for [growing food] for themselves that will improve the community, specifically around food access and gardening (personal interview, 2010).

Sam saw the primary goal of the Program as "showing people an option away from fast food," which he found to be fairly successful. The secondary goal, he said, was providing a "free source of food." As for his gardening experience, he said that his "yields weren't so great," and he joked that he could, "garnish a sandwich." He sees the Program as having the ability to facilitate gardening, and he mentioned that he heard that Growing Hope would be providing gardening classes in the future, saying that this would be a valuable improvement in the Program.

In the context of "moving away from fast food," he talked about the need to change the increasingly passive relationship between suppliers and consumers by developing a new relationship with food, and realizing that food "is something to be grown and sustained." For Sam and Lin, an enthusiastic and highly involved program participant, an immediate impact of the program was drawing attention to a necessary lifestyle change. When asked about the ability of the garden to increase food access, Lin said:

Yeah, I think, from one to ten, ten's the best, probably seven or eight, I think, and for our situation I think...because...we are still kind of accustomed to, you know we go to grocery store and buy things, and put it in the fridge. Then we look inside and see what we can cook. Instead of doing that we should go out to the garden and see what's there. So it's kind of reversed, right? You don't have the food already on hand, you have to look in there and see what's good. So I think, it can be changed but not like right away. My husband says, 'Oh don't pick that!' because my husband is in charge of the cooking. So, in the beginning, 'Oh don't pick that, I'm going to cook it.' And when he's going to cook it he just looks inside of the refrigerator and forgets what's outside (personal interview, 2010).

From Sam and Lin's comments, it seems that before more long-term goals of food security and community empowerment can be realized, there are two main obstacles which must first be overcome: first is a lifestyle change where growing one's own food is more highly valued, and second is acquiring the skills to successfully garden.

Lin was one of the more successful gardeners in the Raised Bed Vegetable Garden Program. In fact, she had taken the initiative to install many more raised beds on her own using scrap lumber she got from someone off of Craig's List. In addition she had collected eight rain barrels and she was making her own compost in some of the beds she constructed. She had essentially taught herself how to garden (and to compost) though checking out books from libraries. GH provides books for program participants to check out, and Lin used GH's library as well as books she purchased to learn about gardening. She came to the United States from Taiwan seven years ago, and since then she has been learning about backyard gardening. When asked about the program fee, Lin explained what she found to be the more pressing issue:

I think, for my experience, I don't really think Growing Hope they put too much effort on this program. I feel like I was kind of on my own. Nobody asking, 'Oh, how's your [garden]' ...You know, I'm not saying that I want people to pressure me on or whatever...But it's like, uh, 'Do you face any difficulty or any problem we can help you with?' Or, Growing Hope is not just a kind of, the type of organization focused on this part.

So maybe there's different expectations, yeah, so I don't feel like I'm getting out of this, you know, gardening help too much from Growing Hope. But, of course it depends on, you know, what the organization is going to focus on...the social non-profit to help the local... But, as a backyard gardener we probably want to have more help from organizations. And if we can get more help I think the fee is not the main issue (personal interview, 2010).

For 2011, as a result of feedback received about the 2010 program, GH addressed the problem of differing expectations by including a section on their website that details what participants can expect from the Raised Bed Vegetable Garden Program. Expectations include:

- 3 raised bed garden boxes that are 4 feet by 4 feet each and 8 inches tall - 1 box will have simple 2 foot tall trellis (we will bring these with us and help you assemble)
- Soil to fill all of the beds (we will bring with us at the time of install and help fill the beds)
- 10 vegetable and herb seedlings and 10 seed packets (you may pick them up at our plant sale or market booth)
- Invitation to 3 free healthy eating and gardening classes (classes are also open to the public)
- Monthly newsletter with gardening tips and garden-fresh seasonal recipes (May-Oct)

- A small scale and supplies to weigh and keep track of your garden harvest (Growing Hope, n.d.).

This list of expectations generated by GH addresses multiple issues of concern that were expressed by interviewees of the 2010 program, including the introduction of healthy eating and gardening classes, a monthly newsletter, and a steady supply of materials to participate in the weighing and tracking of produce, which were unable to be provided for all participants in previous years.

Laura, a summer Americorps VISTA Growing Hope staff member working on the Raised Bed Program, touched on the problems discussed by Lin and said that following up with participants is an area where she would like to see improvement. She told me how important follow-up is and how she struggled to improve this aspect of the Program: “The difference there is staff turnover, unfortunately...For instance, I had to push really hard to have a physical presence at the Farmer’s Market.” She said she was glad that she was able to convince people that a consistent presence in the market is necessary. For Laura, not only is more outreach and follow-up necessary for the Program to be successful, but participants also need to see as a Growing Hope as a resource the entire time and there needs to be a continuing relationship between Program staff and participants.

Don, another lead volunteer, felt that one of the main goals of the program was to reduce the costs of feeding families and to help them get access to healthier food. He also said that a goal was to get people started with growing their own food and that the program serves as a starting point for people that want to garden but may be overwhelmed. In his opinion, for the purpose of providing a first step, the Program was successful. Don’s idea of the program being the initial catalyst for people who want to start gardening but aren’t able to on their own is in tension with both Andrea and Laura’s description of Program goals. The difference is that the staff members describe the Program’s role in terms of an ongoing relationship where there is give and take between Program staff and participants, while Don describes the program merely as an initial resource to get gardeners started. Clearly navigating between the various perspectives I’ve mentioned in the previous pages can seem both confusing and contradictory. The main contradiction lies between the differing ideas about expectations and outcomes that exist among staff, volunteers, and participants. For the 2010 program, there seemed to be a gap in communication between

people involved in different roles in the program. As mentioned previously, GH has begun to address this issue by providing more educational opportunities and outlining a clear list of expectations for program participants.

While the staff members had far-reaching and long-term goals in mind for the program, it seemed that volunteers and participants were mainly affected by the more immediate impacts of the program, such as how to grow a garden successfully and how to incorporate a garden effectively into their lifestyle. An additional approach to this problem is that program staff could make it a point to thoroughly explain not only expectations, but also their mission and goals in both the short- and long-term to program staff, volunteers and participants. Another solution I would offer is for program staff to re-evaluate their mission as well the way that they engage phrases such as “community empowerment,” “enhancing community,” and “community food security,” because for 2010 program participants and volunteers, these ideas were not yet a significant part of their experience.

The program is now in it’s third year, and already program has taken significant steps to improve its design. However, if the Program is to achieve the lofty goals it aspires to, I would suggest that more resources will need to be invested in both program design and staffing. If more resources are not directed into the program, then the program goals need to be readjusted so that they better reflect what participants are likely or able to experience and accomplish in their raised bed gardening experience.

4. CONCLUSION

Returning to the tension between ‘local food’ and ‘food security’ movements, I argue that the two are not much different from one another in the respect that they both emphasize individual responses to the localization of food systems and that they share aspirations of encouraging policy changes as a result of “grassroots” mobilization. They also share a glaring contradiction—they are positioned within an “alternative” food movement that is predicated on white cultural values that perceive the major barriers to the consumption of locally produced food to be knowledge, access, and cost.

GH’s programming is unique because of notions of empowerment it includes in the statement of its mission. I argue that empowerment comes from within individuals, and that organizations can facilitate empowerment by taking advantage of opportunities of building social and cultural capital—two major tenets of community-based urban agriculture. In

turn, this encourages place-based community development. Organizations cannot, however, be the empowerers, as empowerment is the result of a transformation that occurs within individuals that changes how they perceive and relate to the world around them.

GH's programs have helped to sustain a growing demand for urban gardens in the city of Ypsilanti, however I argue that their current direction unnecessarily emphasizes quantifying the economic impact of gardens. While this may be attractive to funders, the reality is that a majority of activities that occur in Ypsilanti's gardens are related to social interaction and community building. As my own experience in the NPCG reveals, growing food (especially organically) is unpredictable, and can undermine any possibility of food security in the blink of an eye. This fact leads me to suggest that GH and other organizations focusing on food security should place less emphasis on neoliberal ideas of individualism and self-improvement, and focus more on regulatory solutions such as eliminating redlining, investing in urban renewal, expanding entitlement programs, obtaining living wages, and eliminating toxins from and improving the quality of the mainstream food supply (Guthman, 2008).

These solutions bypass the irony of the "alternative" food movement, whose motive has been critically described as "bringing good food to others" (Guthman, 2008). At the same time, they are sensitive to the desires and cultural aspirations of the objects of these programs, who may or may not see gardening as an effective or appropriate solution to food security crises. In summary, a different organizational approach to the problems associated with urban blight could be to focus on gardens primarily as an opportunity for social interaction and the building of neighborhood, citywide and organizational networks, rather than emphasizing the production aspect of gardens. The building of social and cultural capital is integral to successful community development, and could be better facilitated by non-profit programming. Local food and food security movements are for the most part newly formed and dynamic, and I recommend that these movements embrace some of the contradictions of their work to become more flexible and successful. By doing so, the organizational programming of GH and others will be better able to reflect the desires and aspirations of the communities they serve.

LIMITATIONS

A major limitation of this study was the small sample size. As a result, it is impossible to say how my interviewees experiences compare to others involved in GH's programs. In the future, a more thorough network study could be conducted to help remedy this imbalance. Still, I did my best to reflect the viewpoints of my interviewees without making sweeping generalizations about the many individuals I did not have the opportunity to interview.

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