

Securing Healthy Food Access in Economically Distressed Urban Neighborhoods: An Alternative Approach a.k.a. Food Justice

Our Kitchen Table (OKT) is a local grassroots group striving towards achieving environmental, social, and food justice for women with children as well as low-income earners. OKT's Food Diversity Project (FDP) was designed as a call to action to achieve food and environmental justice, which involves challenging the systematic power inherent to a capitalistic economy structured by neo-liberal policies (the privatization or outsourcing of public amenities for monetary gain). Efforts around food security and environmental stewardship reinforce these policies if they operate out of the paradigm of utilizing agricultural businesses for providing access to healthy food rather than advocating for changing the structural conditions responsible for food insecurity. The FDP is an alternative model for supplying disadvantaged and economically distressed neighborhoods with access to nutritious food.

Our Kitchen Table (OKT)—a local grassroots group that assists women, children, and low income earners around food and environmental justice issues—partook in the Greater Grand Rapids Food Systems Councils' (GRFSC) 2007 Building Food Power (BFP) project funded with USDA support. OKT conducted a survey for the BFP as well as reviewed data collected and maintained by a locally based collaboration workgroup called the Environmental Indicator Group, which is a part of the Children's Environmental Health Initiative. The data revealed that three (3) geographical regions—East Town, Garfield, and Southtown neighborhoods located on the Southeast side of Grand Rapids, MI.—are “hot spots.” The term “hot spots” refers to the fact they meet the respective criteria for being defined as a food desert: a locale deficient in the amount of grocery stores or available resources for fresh and accessible food. Not only are these “hot spots” food deserts, they have persistent and growing environmental health disparities associated with childhood lead poisoning, obesity, and asthma related symptoms. The BFP had another major finding indicating many participants viewed power, in relation to securing food, as the ability to provide for their children even if this entailed buying a dollar menu burger from fast food establishments and other similar businesses.

Many residents do depend on fast food for a cheap food resource in these food deserts. Since OKT attends to identifying neighborhood assets and not deficits or individual behavior, it was also observed residents are growing food in their yards throughout these targeted neighborhoods. During 2008 and 2009, OKT decided to host a series of community dialogues and events to engage these residents in identifying action oriented solution steps concerning these disparities and injustices. From this community dialogue, it became apparent that majority of residents wanted to build their capacity around food security and environmental stewardship. Based upon these conversations as well as the BFP data, the Food Diversity Project (FDP) emerged. The FDP is a resident led food and environmental justice movement being applied to these “hot spots” as pilot sites for addressing these injustice issues.

The FDP is only one approach among multiple approaches to food security. It differs in the sense that its lens is through the eyes of community residents, and seeks to create a paradigm shift away from how other approaches around food security do not advocate for systemic change, and continue to support a business/economic development model of food production. The FDP model involves encouraging community members to build their capacity around their social capital (resources/assets). Capacity building will involve designing a neighborhood-based support system convened around the growing and sharing of food. Since attendees of the community meetings were most interested in expanding the number of urban yard food gardens, the FDP intends to establish an urban garden group patterned on this type of cooperative model to be implemented in Southeast neighborhoods as an alternative approach to providing access to healthy food.

The FDP's development was also in reaction to many residents residing in these Southeast neighborhoods who have expressed that they feel unequipped to participate and lead in many projects designed to address food security and environmental issues in their homes and neighborhoods. This is particularly true for those who are single women, earn low wages, are unemployed, and/or are a primary care giver of school aged children or younger. Projects, targeting this demographic of people, are

typically left to outside experts including non profit groups as well as governmental agencies. Unfortunately, this work has had no measurable outcomes indicating that residents, in these “hot spots,” are benefiting from these efforts in a sustainable and long term way. For example, despite the implementation of neighborhood based farmer’s markets that allow the use of EBT benefits (formally known as food stamps), low-income earners have difficulty accessing these fresh food venues, and still can not afford locally produced dairy products, grains, meats, herbs, vegetables and fruits, which are often sold at exorbitant prices. In other words, food insecurity continues to be a persistent problem, and projects designed from outside groups would not be as necessarily prevalent if residents could build their own capacity for instituting food and environmental justice.

OKT values nutritious food as a right for all human beings, and something that should not be contingent on agricultural businesses, the efforts of these outside organizations, or on a person’s income or place of residence. One way to increase residents’ access to fresh and affordable food is providing people with the means to own their food production. For this reason, OKT views food security as the equivalent of self-sustainability, and sustainable food production. Through self-determination, low-income residents should eventually be able to maintain their neighborhood food system by deciding how to introduce nutritious food into their communities and partake in creating their own local food movement in which affordability will not exclude them from participation. This is what is referred to as food and environmental justice or the fundamental concept behind this project: It maintains that food is a human right, and advances self reliance by placing “communities in leadership of their own solutions and providing them with the tools to address the disparities within our food systems and within society at large” (Holt-Gimenez et al. 2009: 159).

In order to eventually have this movement owned and led by community members, OKT has integrated Popular Education’ as well as the Building Movement Project’s (BMP) methods into this project. Freire (1970) developed the Popular Education model. It is "popular" in the sense of being “of the people.” The goal of popular education is to develop peoples’ capacity for social change through a collective problem solving approach emphasizing participation, reflection, and critical analysis of social problems that are already familiar and/or practiced by the populous. This approach, in general, constitutes the basic tenets of the BMP.

The BMP begins with changing the discourse within the non-profit sector to endorse and clearly define the often co-opted values of community, justice, fairness, equity, and sustainability. Ultimately, this project promotes change in social service agencies in how they deal with bottom up grass roots and community-based groups (<http://www.buildingmovement.org>). Based on these models, the FDP encourages neighborhood residents to self determine systemic change in a collective manner. Participants are taught how to be agents in effecting social change: These efforts are otherwise known as capacity building: intentionally created resident led activities that combat power.

Capacity building activities began to occur with the emergence of the FDP concept. As mentioned, OKT began to facilitate community building and educational activities during the years of 2008 and 2009. Activities included a canning and seed saving event, cooking demonstrations with local produce, food garden tours, and introducing new gardeners to experienced gardeners in order for them to begin growing and sharing food for building a self-contained community, to improve their health status, and to build capacity for developing a local food system. 2009’s activities will extend into 2010. This year, there are additional plans for activities such as an herbal garden tour for health and culinary purposes; encouraging existing and new gardeners to grow and share food collectively as well as diversify their gardens by planting foods they are unfamiliar with; and relegate excess herbs and produce to a pilot community kitchen for communal cooking, eating, and providing a functional kitchen for those who do not have one. During these activities, residents increase their knowledge about the relationship of food to the injustices that they experience.

Neighborhood self-reliance involves residents living as sustainable as possible, which the FDP demonstrates through its activities, which are simultaneously fun, educational, and chosen by participants. Educational activities, thus far, have and will include interactive hands-on exhibits, neighborhood-based capacity building trainings/workshops, and home-based indoor and outdoor environmental justice tours.

Through these activities, people relate how growing their own food challenges the power impacting their livelihoods, supplements income, and has health benefits. First, the raising of consciousness must occur for people to learn the historical, economical, and political context for their poverty and lack of food security. Thus, the FDP takes an interactive educational approach for connecting these issues to sustainable living as well as the deeply interconnected issues of environmental racism and degradation.

FDP's activities incorporate "hands on" education about these issues by encouraging participants to use heirloom seeds, do seed saving, and grow local food to preserve bio-diversity. Through these sustainable practices and education, they are learning the importance of why bio-diversity is fundamental to a self-sufficient and sustainable model. Participants are learning how preserving bio-diversity is in direct opposition to an industrial agriculture system, which displaces small farmers to grow mono-crops that exhaust their nearby ecological system. To the contrary, small scale local farming or gardening is less land intensive, and creates bio-diversity as well as sustainability in the sense that people can be self-reliant along with preserving the land for continuous food production if the land is not destroyed by pesticides, fertilizers and the overuse of land (Shiva 2005).

The FDP intentionally educates participants about why preserving bio-diversity is interconnected with self-sufficient and sustainable neighborhoods especially in light of the increasing popularity of outside organizers' traditional media campaigns, health fairs, and organizationally based community gardens. These activities are regarded as fairly inexpensive, community friendly interventions to address the challenges of these "hot spots". However, these interventions are not very effective in helping community residents' understand environmental health hazards and how to avoid them as they relate to growing their food and/or food insecurity. Top down approaches preclude self-determinative food production, and tend to promote the agendas of organizers who, even unintentionally, are reinforcing these structural conditions that allow food insecurity and environmental hazards to continuously exist. This is what is referred to as power: resources (knowledge/expertise, monetary, land, water, etc.), and the ability to distribute these resources, on the behalf of neighborhood residents, is concentrated in only the hands of a portion of the population. OKT is mindful of not reproducing these relations of power. Hence, OKT believes the key to promoting urban sustainability is building a cooperative model in which residents share food and build upon their existing social capital (such as knowledge of how to grow food) in conjunction with solidifying social networks for maintaining this connectivity.

Overall, the FDP is a community owned and managed bottom up approach for building food security and sustainability. It has a deeply ingrained food justice perspective for challenging power through encouraging people to live and grow their food in a long-term and sustainable manner. Structural change needs to occur for eradicating the conditions in which people live in poverty and are food insecure. Everyone has the right to food through autonomy and self-determination as well as the assurance that one can have food security independent of grocers, charity, federal funding, non-profit as well as community development groups. OKT believes this strategy of environmental stewardship is best achieved via collective action and communal support.

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