Growing food to grow cities? The potential of agriculture for economic and community development in the urban United State

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The potential of agriculture for economic and community development in the urban United States

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Abstract
Agriculture has become a focus of planning for urban regeneration in the United States. However, to make agriculture an impactful part of urban community and economic development — rather than a passing fad — it is vital to identify its most effective forms. This paper reports on field research in six cities in the United States where municipalities, non-profit organizations and residents are deploying farming and gardening for diverse economic development objectives. Our findings suggest that despite expectations that urban agriculture will attract capital, create jobs and tax ratables and increase property values in preparation for 'higher-value' development, its greatest potential is in social enterprise, supplementing incomes, developing human and social capital and promoting food security.

Introduction

With growing attention of American planners and community developers to food systems, municipalities, scholars and advocates have touted urban agriculture as a strategy to achieve various community and economic development goals. While some focus on farming and gardening as instruments of food security and community building (Brown and Carter, 2003; Smit and Bailkey, 2006; Dubbeling et al., 2009), others tout urban farming as a way to create jobs, attract capital and turn ‘unproductive’ land into taxable property

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Although not mutually exclusive, urban agriculture appears better suited to achieve some objectives more than others. Identifying its most effective uses is vital to making urban agriculture an impactful part of community economic development.

As a recent American Planning Association report notes, economic development outcomes are the ‘least documented aspect of urban agriculture’ (Hodgson et al., 2011). Sceptics doubt urban farming’s potential to reach scale or create decent jobs. Previous studies cited obstacles that persist today, including land tenure disputes, size of enterprises, low wages and lack of community capacity (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000). Beyond these practical barriers, tension exists over the appropriate forms, purposes and ownership of agriculture in cities.

This paper draws upon field research in six cities in the Northeast and the Midwest United States – Camden and Trenton, NJ; Chicago, IL; Detroit, MI; Milwaukee, WI; and Philadelphia, PA – where municipalities, non-profit organizations and residents deploy urban agriculture in service of economic development. We characterize these deployments in terms of their institutional contexts, goals and outcomes (Table 1). In some cases, municipalities and investors have targeted urban farming with expectations of capital attraction, tax ratable development and private sector job creation. They argue for privileging farms over community gardens, making urban agriculture a formal market activity. Some have imagined farming as an interim use for vacant land, expecting that more lucrative development will supplant it when markets improve. However, cities have struggled to realize initiatives that cast agriculture in traditional economic development policy terms.

Instead, these cities’ farms and community gardens yield other sorts of economic outcomes. We argue that the foremost contributions of urban agriculture to economic development lie in developing the human and social capital necessary to effectuate ‘inside-out’ community revitalization. In US cities, urban farming is an effective form of social enterprise, supplemental income generation and workforce integration. Moreover, community gardening sustains vital networks of social and material support that traditional economic development research leaves unmeasured.

We assert that urban agriculture can be most effectively deployed for economic development with the adoption of a consumption base model that includes significant investments in community-based institutions and networks. Investments in the consumption base can ultimately catalyse import substitution and potentially the formation of new ‘traded clusters.’ In the near term, however, a consumption base approach would focus on food access, supplemental income generation, place making and growing human and social capital.
Methods
This article synthesizes several areas of our research and practice. We have supported non-profit organizations in the six cities in programme development and evaluation research. We have also assisted policy-makers in these and other cities with planning and policy for urban agriculture. These experiences inspired us to conduct semi-structured interviews with twenty-three municipal bureaucrats from planning, economic development and parks departments, and leaders of urban agriculture organizations, eliciting their reflections on the goals and outcomes of their work, including job and enterprise development (Table 1). Finally, in Camden, Chicago, Philadelphia and Trenton, we have conducted fieldwork tallying food production and

Table 1. Urban agriculture research sites and programmes where we conducted interviews (in order of their cities’ appearance in this article)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Programme/enterprise</th>
<th>Type(s) of economic development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detroit, Michigan</td>
<td>Hantz farms</td>
<td>Large-scale commercial farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Detroit</td>
<td>Grown In Detroit Cooperative</td>
<td>Supplemental income generation for households; workforce development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Planning Commission (1); Grown In Detroit (2)</td>
<td>Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority Greenhouse Project</td>
<td>Medium-scale commercial farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation plan</td>
<td>Medium-scale commercial farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks (3, 23), Redevelopment (4), and Sustainability (22) staff; Pennsylvania Horticultural Society staff (9, 10) and growers; other garden support programme staff (17, 18, 20, 21), farmers and community gardeners</td>
<td>Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Harvest Growers Alliance</td>
<td>Supplemental income generation; non-profit-sector job creation; workforce and youth development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing Home</td>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>Social support/poverty alleviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>Social support/poverty alleviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>Growing Power staff (6) and board (7, 19) members</td>
<td>Small-scale commercial farming (with full-time employees); workforce and youth development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Growing Home staff (8); community garden support programme staff (5); community gardeners and farmers</td>
<td>Workforce development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden City Garden Club staff (12, 13) and growers; other garden support programme staff (11), and community gardeners</td>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>Social support/poverty alleviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camden</td>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>Social support/poverty alleviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trenton</td>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td>Social support/poverty alleviation</td>
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*Interviews are referenced by number in text.
interviewing growers (over 80 farmers and 200 gardeners) about distribution from community gardens and farms (Vitiello and Nairn, 2009; Vitiello et al., 2010a, b).

Integrating this research with findings of other scholars, we advance a critique of the premise that conventional forms of economic development evaluation are appropriate to the study of urban agriculture. We purposefully depart from these traditional standards of evidence in economic development research in order to highlight non-conventional forms of value. Parsing urban agriculture’s diverse economic impacts is vital for making sense of its broader ‘multifunctional’ benefits (Lovell, 2010).

Our case cities share many characteristics, but also vary significantly. All underwent deindustrialization, leaving high poverty rates and much vacant land. All have large, diverse urban agriculture sectors. Chicago, Philadelphia, and to some extent Detroit and Milwaukee have affluent markets for local food in the central city (Camden and Trenton do not). Politicians and bureaucrats in all the six cities have encouraged urban agriculture, citing economic and other benefits, with varying emphases and expectations.

Agriculture as conventional target: expectations and realities

The late-twentieth-century depopulation and deterioration of inner cities in the Rustbelt of the Northeast and the Midwest presented a new logic for urban agriculture. It became a tool for repurposing vacant land where thousands of homes and factories once stood. Scholars and advocates have helped legitimize urban agriculture as an economic redevelopment strategy, suggesting that it can thrive where more capital-intensive efforts have failed (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Smit, 2007; Urban Partners, 2007). Mallach (2010, p. 32) calls for an Office of Urban Agriculture in the US Department of Agriculture to further job- and revenue-generating enterprise. The American Planning Association report encourages cities to deploy investments to attract and grow agricultural enterprises (Hodgson et al., 2011). Planners speak enthusiastically about urban farms as suppliers to grocery stores, restaurants and processors. In this context, some municipalities and entrepreneurs have launched farming projects conceived as conventional, even large-scale, economic development.¹

Hantz farms

The best-known for-profit farming proposal in the United States has come from multimillionaire financier and Detroit resident John Hantz. His

¹ Portions of this section are adapted from Hodgson et al., Urban Agriculture, for which Domenic Vitiello co-authored the Philadelphia and Detroit case studies.
company, Hantz Farms, seeks to develop the nation’s largest urban farm in Detroit. Much of the national debate over farming in distressed cities has been refracted through this case (DeLind, 2011). It raises questions about class and racial justice and also cities’ ability to regulate agriculture.

Hantz originally proposed a 20,000-acre farm with 250 employees growing vegetables, fruit and timber (Hantz, 2009). ‘Not only will we grow for Detroit’, noted the company, ‘but we’ll also be able to export our produce’ (Hantz, 2012). Hantz also envisioned another export industry, agritourism, with pumpkin picking and Christmas trees and a research centre to commercialize technologies like hydroponics and aeroponics. From the city, Hantz sought free land and reduced property taxes (Whitford, 2009).

Hantz’s proposal attracted interest from media, city officials and philanthropists, but opposition quickly arose, sparking debate over its scale, ownership and equity. Critics charge that large-scale farming will reproduce the region’s stark racial inequality, with low-paying, exploitative jobs and environmental degradation (DeLind, 2011; Colasanti et al., 2012; Yakini, 2012). To many observers, including Detroit growers who have stewarded vacant parcels for decades without public support, the prospect of officials transferring vast acreage to a wealthy white man in a city of overwhelmingly poor, historically disenfranchised African Americans is an intolerable ‘land grab’ (interview 2). Some believe that Hantz actually aims to acquire land cheaply and later sell or develop it (interviews 1 and 2; Campbell, 2010; White, 2010; Gallagher, 2011; Sands, 2012).

Planners and politicians also raised concerns about their ability to regulate farms like Hantz. The city lobbied the state to exempt it from laws protecting farms against nuisance claims, which would have shielded Hantz from municipal regulation (Hodgson et al., 2011; interview 1). Ultimately, in late 2012 the city council voted five-to-four to sell 140 acres to Hantz for ~8 cents per square foot. Yet fears of pollution led the council to prohibit Hantz from growing food (Sands, 2012). For now, this is a forestry project.

Philadelphia

For a decade, Philadelphia’s government has explored farming’s economic development potential. In 2003, the Water Department’s economic development director provided land to test the Small Plot Intensive (SPIN) method of market gardening. By its fourth and final year, this farm grossed $68,000, with two farmers and one intern (Urban Partners, 2007). This provided a data point for proponents of commercial urban farming, complementing another local study’s finding that greening increases property values (Wachter and Wong, 2008). Other city departments then launched separate attempts to establish commercial farming at a larger scale.
In 2009, Philadelphia’s Redevelopment Authority (PRA) issued a request for proposals seeking farmers to erect greenhouses on sites it controls, to grow for 3–5 years before making way for development. PRA staff imagined farms could beautify and draw attention to lots they sought to market. But only one established farmer applied. Instead, unrealistic proposals from inexperienced growers inspired a view among PRA staff that urban farming was ‘just a fad’ (interview 4). The initiative stopped there.

Farming appeared a better fit for the Department of Parks and Recreation’s mission and properties. At Saul Agricultural High School, in 2009 the park leased two acres to Weavers Way Cooperative to run an organic farm with students. At nearby 76-acre Manatawna Farm, in 2010 the department sought to establish ten half-acre farm enterprises, inspired by the SPIN model, to further demonstrate the viability of for-profit farming. However, Saul High School stood to lose five of the thirty-five acres of hay it grew there for its animals. Its principal allied with affluent neighbours who convinced their councilman to ban commercial farming on the site, largely to prevent more labour-intensive farming that would bring more people to this still-rural setting. Other critics noted the irony of transferring land to the city’s largely white, middle-class urban farmers while removing it from a use supporting vocational education for mostly working-class, minority teens (Hodgson et al., 2011; interview 3).

These experiences do not refute claims that urban farming can thrive as private enterprise in US cities. But they underscore the equity concerns, complex politics of race and class, and distrust of farming, for reasons both inclusionary and exclusionary, that complicate efforts to realize such claims. They also raise the question of whether agriculture should be a long-term use or it should merely help prime urban spaces for ‘higher-order’ development. For most farmers and gardeners, agriculture is not viable in a regime of short-term land tenure (Schukoske, 2000).

Despite some proponents’ claims, the proposition that agriculture can attract private capital or create jobs at scale – and hence that it can serve traditional economic development goals – remains largely untested. Most urban farms in the United States, including those operating ‘for-profit’, remain subsidized by philanthropy, government and usually many hours of volunteer and intern labour, much as rural farms rely heavily on subsidies from the state, apprentices and sometimes philanthropy (Lepeska, 2013). The small number of recently established, for-profit rooftop and indoor farms typically employ fewer people and provide a small portion of the food served at expensive restaurants in affluent cities where the ‘urban imaginary’ of local food (Lefebvre, 1991) has become integral to some restaurants’ business models. While they contribute meaningfully to the consumption base, they yield minimal economic development payoffs, especially for poorer communities.
Social enterprise, supplemental income and workforce development

Most farming in US cities (and some in rural areas) is social enterprise, elevat-
ing mission above profit, employing a combination of sales plus grants
and other subsidies to achieve alternative economic development objectives.
Agricultural social enterprises and organizations create non-profit-sector
jobs, foster workforce development and help people generate supplemental
income, often by strengthening ties between growers and the formal
economy and by building social capital. Some municipalities have approached
urban farming with community-based partners focused on these goals.

To expect that urban farming will yield more than supplemental income for
most growers belies the realities of American agriculture. Earnings from farm
labour are traditionally low, and wage and career mobility difficult to attain
(Bernick, 2005, p. 95–101). Many owner–operator farmers have more than
one job, although rural farmers often own land and other assets that enable
greater access to credit than many urban farmers enjoy.

Supporting supplemental income generation can be an impactful strategy.
Cobbling together, income from multiple low-wage, often informal jobs is
common among poor households, which are sensitive to small changes in
income or expenses (as Nelson, 1996 argues, the household is the appropriate
unit of analysis for economics). Supplemental income plus food from farming
may be vital to household food and economic security. This mix of social and
economic benefits is common in the ‘kitchen capitalism’ of urban America’s
low-wealth micro-entrepreneurs (Sherraden et al., 2004).

Urban agriculture is also an effective means of workforce integration for
refugees, people leaving prison and youths. Some skills they develop are spe-
cific to farming and gardening. Others are transferrable to different sectors, and
many programmes impart life skills with significant (indirect) economic value.

Economic security and workforce integration are often intertwined, aided
by social capital – embedded norms and relationships that provide informa-
tion, moral and material support (Granovetter, 1985; Coleman, 1988). Urban
grower training and support programmes build human capital partly by cre-
ating social capital around communities’ networks of food production, distri-
bution and consumption (Allen et al., 2008; Alaimo et al., 2010). Perhaps more
than any other community economic development intervention, they
promote a ‘civic agriculture’, characterized by shared ownership and sup-
portive relationships (Lyson, 2004).

Grower development programmes

The prominent urban farming organizations Growing Power and Growing
Home illustrate the range of human capital development programmes in
American urban agriculture. They train new farmers, youth, refugees and people formerly homeless or incarcerated, running and supporting diverse social enterprises fostering workforce integration and supplemental income generation.

Milwaukee-based Growing Power trains thousands of people yearly and supports training centres in a dozen other regions with partners including the Brooklyn Rescue Mission, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and Minnesota Women’s Environmental Institute (interviews 6 and 7). In Milwaukee, where 53 percent of black men were jobless in 2009, the municipality’s African-American Male Unemployment Task Force funded Growing Power to create 150 full-time jobs for low-income residents, including former prisoners. Recognizing it cannot sustain these jobs without subsidy, Growing Power cast this project in social as well as economic terms, as ‘a powerful opportunity to provide dignified work’ and help ‘people to stabilize their own lives’ (Growing Power, 2011; Lepeska, 2013; also interviews 6 and 7).

Growing Power’s youth programme with the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board also focuses on building social capital. It employs teens from low-wealth families, who learn about farming, cooking, nutrition, community leadership, public speaking and basic aspects of business. Participants engage in critical analysis of the food system and economy (interviews 6 and 7). This mix of knowledge, critical thinking and work and life skills characterizes similar programmes in many US cities (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The stipends youth earn are an important source of income for their households, though often dwarfed by the replacement value of the food youth bring home (interviews 17, 18, 20 and 22).

Growing Power has also assisted Somali and Hmong refugees via the National Immigrant Farmer Initiative and Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program, which support gardens and farm incubators. These programmes help refugees capitalize on existing skills, develop new ones (including language), form small businesses, meet neighbours and feed communities (Laverentz, 2012). Participants gain social and mental health benefits and household economic security that are not reflected in their pecuniary earnings (interviews 5, 6, 11 and 19).

Growing Home in Chicago demonstrates how some of the most important economic and other outcomes of urban agriculture training have little to do with farming jobs. Participants in its 14-week transitional jobs programme for people formerly homeless or incarcerated gain experience in marketing, distribution and customer service as well as farming. Director Harry Rhodes calls it ‘more of a work-study program than job training’. As in similar programmes elsewhere, graduates find employment especially in landscaping and food service (interview 8; also interviews 9, 10, 21 and 22), sectors with somewhat better job ladders than farming.
Remarkably, Rhodes reports that of 250 graduates, 70 percent have gained
full-time jobs and 95 percent of people with criminal backgrounds have
stayed out of prison, in a state with recidivism rates around 50 percent. Pro-
gramme staff and participants explain this success partly by crediting the re-
storative qualities of urban agriculture. Cultivating, selling and preparing
food engages all of the senses, a rare dynamics in workforce programmes.
Former prisoners are sometimes feeding and restoring vacant land in com-
munites they hurt in the past. Rhodes casts this as an integral part of commu-
nity organizing and revitalization (interview 8).

Grower support programmes
Non-profit community gardening programmes in several cities have recently
built citywide support systems for diverse social enterprises of smaller-scale
urban agriculture. The Detroit Garden Resource Program’s Grown in Detroit
Cooperative (started 2006), for example, provides materials, training and
technical assistance in production and marketing for mostly working-class
African-American youth and families who cultivate over eighty community
gardens and farms. Similar citywide programmes of resource provision and
exchange, training, technical assistance and marketing exist at Cultivate
Kansas City, Hollygrove Market in New Orleans, Pennsylvania Horticultural
Society in Philadelphia and Camden City Garden Club (interviews 2, 5–7 and
9–13).

These programmes support supplemental income generation and work-
force and social capital development in many forms, with relatively modest
funding. Many growers are employees of non-profits with farms or
gardens tied to affordable housing, churches or youth programmes. Others
are backyard and community gardeners and homesteaders. Most partici-
pants already own most of the capital requirements to produce and distribute
more food, including knowledge, labour and tools, along with access to land.
Evaluation research has shown that grower support programmes help people
grow more, access markets and strengthen networks of production, distribu-
tion and mutual assistance. They directly and indirectly support non-profit
job creation, and also the settlement of scores of young people who have
moved to these cities seeking to farm (interviews 2, 9–13, 17 and 20–23).
This attraction of new residents can yield significant economic benefits
beyond their agricultural ventures.

More than being just market-driven, these programmes promote growers’
social missions. Not all gardeners or farmers sell, and those that do, reach a
mix of high- and low-wealth markets, often choosing to enable poor neigh-
bours’ consumption of healthy food above outlets that promise greater
revenue. Many have created new markets that promote local cycling of
money, for example, as neighbours buying food help support stipends for
local youth. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society requires participants to donate food to hunger relief organizations. Staff promotes nutrient-dense foods, addressing nutritional as much as commercial objectives (interviews 9 and 10). This contrasts with the SPIN method, which promotes the highest-priced crops.

Public authorities often do not clearly understand the economic development outcomes of social enterprise approaches to urban agriculture. Supplemental income, food security, nutrition and human and social capital can be challenging to measure. Growing Power’s staff evaluator, Martin Bailkey, asserts that ‘overall success’ of urban agriculture enterprises must be measured by their ‘cumulative impact’, accounting for more than employment and profits (interview 6). Some economic outcomes bear out over the long term. Research has shown that youth in urban agriculture programmes gain lasting health, social, ecological and economic literacies, including cooking and basic business skills (Allen et al., 2008; Krasny and Tidball, 2009; Draper and Freedman, 2010). More research is needed about the impacts of urban agriculture social enterprises on employment, income growth and business formation.

Urban agriculture as poverty alleviation and social support

To date, the most pervasive economic benefits of urban agriculture in the United States come not from urban farming, but from community gardening, which is the dominant form of urban agriculture in almost all US cities, involving far more people and growing more food.2 Echoing the patterns above, research has found that community gardening builds job skills, social capital, and labour market attachment opportunities often linked to the social enterprises noted above (Feenstra et al., 1999; Ferris et al., 2001; Glover et al., 2005; Alaimo et al., 2010). It also fosters networks of social and material support. Community and backyard gardens contribute significantly to some households’ food budgets, and gardeners sustain active networks of distribution to neighbours and strangers as a deliberate form of food relief (Hannah and Oh, 2000; Saldívar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004; Vitiello and Nairn, 2009; Vitiello et al., 2010a).

Quantitative evidence of these impacts at the citywide scale comes from studies of food production in hundreds of community gardens in Philadelphia, Camden, Trenton, New York, and Chicago (Vitiello and Nairn, 2009; Vitiello et al., 2010a, b; Farming Concrete, 2012). This research demonstrates that community gardeners dwarf urban farmers in the volume and value of

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2 Home-based gardens presumably produce even more food and impact household and community food economies further.
food they produce. In the summer of 2008, for example, Philadelphia’s 226 community gardens grew roughly 2 million pounds, 9 million servings, worth almost $5 million – more food than all of the city’s farms and farmers markets combined sold the entire year (Vitiello and Nairn, 2009). Among major US cities, only Kansas City and Milwaukee appear to have inner-city farms that out-produce community gardens (interviews 2 and 5–7).

Gardeners’ productivity varies considerably (Beniston and Lal, 2012), but patterns of distribution and consumption reveal much about their roles in community food economies. Only a few gardeners grow most of the produce their households consume annually, although many grow most of the vegetables they eat during summer, and some freeze and eat food from their gardens year-round (Vitiello et al., 2010a, b). Gardeners and recipients of their harvest consume more vegetables and fruit than do average households in their neighbourhoods (Blair et al., 1991; Alaimo et al., 2008). Community gardeners rarely sell their harvest. They give large proportions to others, through various informal and institutional channels, especially to neighbours, family, friends, emergency food pantries and strangers. Gardeners grow food as a purposeful strategy to combat hunger, targeting especially children and seniors (Hannah and Oh, 2000). Cumulatively, these patterns constitute the most direct form of fresh food distribution in most inner-city neighbourhoods.

The economic benefits of community gardens are not generally evident to economic development professionals, yet they constitute one of the most effective and inclusive forms of community revitalization. Economists have paid greater attention to gardens’ positive influence on real-estate values (Voicu and BEEN, 2006). Beyond the benefits for cities’ tax bases and property owners’ asset building, the further impacts of community gardeners’ social capital formation and food production and distribution are especially significant for poor households.

Revisiting the notion of urban agriculture as a conventional target

As practitioners and scholars explore urban agriculture’s potential, they understandably emphasize traditional tools and outcome measures. Economic developers typically seek jobs created, fiscal impacts and export base growth (Malizia and Feser, 1999). But urban agriculture’s promise to achieve these objectives at scale appears limited.

Paradoxically, it is in the elite farm market and restaurant culture of thriving cities like New York and Chicago that urban farming has greatest potential as a conventional profit-generating activity. Elsewhere, investments in social enterprises and social networks appear more promising, particularly in distressed cities like Detroit and Camden and the poor communities of
affluent cities. As McClintock (2013) has argued, balancing the competing priorities of actors engaged in diverse forms of urban agriculture is critical for community development professionals aiming for effective and equitable development.

In struggling US cities, non-profits and public–private partnerships, more than catalysing purely for-profit or large-scale farming, have yielded social enterprises that achieve different economic outcomes. As in the global South (Nugent, 2000; Dubbeling et al., 2009), urban agriculture has worked most effectively for supplemental income generation, workforce development, community-building, poverty alleviation and improvements in health. For the third sector, long urged to raise its own revenue, urban agriculture is succeeding as a social enterprise where other ventures have not.

Our critique of the rush to conventional economic development interventions is also a critique of the equation, in some quarters, of food access with poverty alleviation. Healthy eating can contribute to better economic outcomes. Yet some practitioners, philanthropies and researchers have seized on lack of access to healthy food as a central, almost causal, feature of urban poverty, extrapolating from that to the implication that simply increasing families’ and neighbourhoods’ food choices can be socioeconomically transformative (Guthman, 2011). This notion is even more powerful when accompanied by visions of large-scale job and enterprise creation in urban agriculture. However, just as improved food access alone cannot alter structural inequality, urban farming jobs are unlikely to create what Shapiro (2005) terms ‘transformative wealth’ building and providing economic stability across generations. Instead, urban agriculture has multiple direct and indirect, if ‘lower-order’, economic benefits. It is an important, if by itself inadequate, tool to combat economic insecurity.

Conclusion: considering a consumption base framework

Our findings question the proposition that the dominant, export base model of urban economic development is appropriate for urban agriculture in most US cities. Instead, urban agriculture’s current economic promise lies mainly with its potential to catalyse ‘inside-out’ revitalization in distressed neighbourhoods. This position accords with Markusen and Schrock’s theory of consumption-driven urban economic development (2009), an alternative to the export base model that suggests strategic investment in local consumption leads to job growth and stability. It does this by spurring changes in consumption behaviour that transcend standard definitions of ‘import substitution’; by generating employment among groups with higher local spending propensities; by attracting skilled and creative residents, many of them working in the non-profit sector and by promoting innovations and experiments that may eventually create
new export sectors. A consumption base model can leverage urban agriculture’s capacity to promote cities’ economic resilience, minimizing leakage of food from the local economy and reliance on imports.

Understanding the indirect and induced effects of community gardening and social enterprise, urban farming is critical not only for promoting equity but also for economic development strategy. People who cultivate urban land to supplement their income, feed neighbours or build job skills create economic value that purely commercial farming does not. They are also place makers. Their consumption habits reinforce local food economies and networks of social support, much as artists’ consumption patterns bolster local arts economies (Stern and Seifert, 2008; Markusen and Schrock, 2009). In this light, maximizing urban agriculture’s economic impacts can take the form of enabling broad participation through human capital development, grower support programmes and securing land tenure for gardens and farms.

Community development practitioners must be able to determine how, how much, and for whose benefit urban agriculture can be deployed for economic development purposes in any given setting. For the moment, growing food in cities has proved a valuable way of linking people to non-agricultural labour markets, increasing mutual aid and social capital, generating supplemental income and non-profit-sector jobs that draw young adults to cities, and fighting hunger. Much of this work promotes economic justice and repairs communities damaged by more extractive forms of development. Even as they assess urban agriculture’s potential to promote traditional economic development objectives, government, philanthropy and community practitioners must remember and prioritize conventionally unacknowledged forms of value.

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