Vishnu Yella

North South Foundation

Panacea Challenge

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Making Nutritious Food More Accessible

Food insecurity continues to be a significant inequity in our societies. It affects people of all backgrounds. Although humans have made monumental advances in agricultural technology, biochemistry, and food science, hunger and lack of nutrition remain grave problems that plague low-income areas of the world. In fact, the United Nations estimated that 9.2% of the world suffered from severe food insecurity in 2017 (United Nations ). To put this figure into perspective, almost one in ten people suffered from a severe lack of food in 2017. This problem can not and should not persist. Even in the richest counties and thriving metropolitan cities in the nation, thousands of people suffer from food insecurity. This problem affects people of every demographic. Hunger does not discriminate. We as a people need to take a stand together and eradicate this inequity.

One practical solution is to utilize vacant or abandoned lots in urban areas to grow healthy and sustainable food for people in need. This idea came to me from a local food pantry, run by St. Brendan's Catholic Church. They grow fresh vegetables and distribute them to hundreds of families in need. Traditional gardens and hydroponic nurseries are surprisingly easy to form with little resources. Traditional gardens require soil, garden beds, water, and adequate sunlight to grow crops. Large garden beds produce huge yields of various crops. With a 50 gallon tank, tubing, water, and clay pebbles, hydroponic farms can be built. Although slightly more difficult to set up, hydroponic farms require little maintenance and resources. Both forms of horticulture can support numerous forms of produce.

Urban areas are plagued with abandoned lots and buildings. A survey of seventy major cities by the Brookings Institution found that, on average, fifteen percent of the city’s land was vacant (Pagano 1). Being hard to maintain, these areas are growing expenses for the municipal governments. At a little cost, these lots can be revitalized into eco-friendly, sustainable community gardens. People can grow fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs for their communities with traditional gardening and hydroponics. These gardens could also work in tandem with local food banks and soup kitchens to provide fresh produce for those in need.

This is not a new idea. During WWII, millions of American citizens planted Victory Gardens in suburban and urban areas to prevent a food shortage. Victory Gardens "provided 40 percent of vegetables grown in the country during the war" (National WWII Museum 2). The same model can be implemented at a smaller scale throughout the country and easily bridge gaps in the supply of food with fresh produce.

Other than providing families in need with fresh, nutritious food, this proposal has many more benefits. Communal gardens are a great way to bring families together and contribute to a charitable cause. They can also educate younger children about the importance of nutrition and gardening. Apart from strengthening the community, these gardens will have much-needed environmental benefits by providing greenery and purifying the air.

Although space and climate might be possible constraints to this proposal, there are strategies to mitigate these issues. Thanks to the Green Revolution and current biotechnology, fresh produce does not require much space or money to grow. Incredible yields can be grown in small areas with only natural fertilizers and compost. Regions that experience extreme winters can spring harvest: plant crops in the fall and harvest in the spring. Broccoli, carrots, spinach, lettuce, turnips, and cabbage are apt for this style of farming. Hydroponic crops can be grown year-round. Indoor greenhouses, maintained by artificial lighting, could also be used to mitigate severe weather.

We need to implement projects like this now more than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has left lasting effects on families throughout the world. Unemployment is still higher than normal (~ 6.0%) and many families are struggling to put food on the table (U.S. Department of Labor). Community gardens are one weapon for the war against hunger. We must use them, along with other strategies, to eliminate this issue from our world.

Works Cited

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