SCALES OF IMPACT IN THE MOVE TOWARDS URBAN FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND INNOVATION

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2021
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

As members of the Master’s Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis
prepared by: Natasha Chhabra
titled: Scales of Impact In The Move Towards Urban Food Sovereignty In The San
Francisco Bay Area

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Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon the candidate’s submission of the
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ABSTRACT
Individuals involved in organizations that are fighting for food sovereignty within marginalized communities, are experiencing barriers and limitations when it comes to making the impact that they are aiming to. This is due to the ways that neoliberalism frames the US corporate agriculture sector and maneuvers into local food movements, in order to limit food justice efforts. In this study, I worked with local non-profit and community-based organizations to identify specific limitations and challenges that activists and social entrepreneurs are facing in 2 neighborhoods within San Francisco and Oakland. I also explored the possibilities of scaling impact as a tool to increase the collaboration of organizations and further affect change. Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with informants from each organization. I relied on a community-based snowball approach for participant recruitment. I conducted 7 key informant interviews (n=7). Five key themes were found in these interviews, broadly characterized into mission rigidity, financial constraints, organizational capacity and adaptation, and perpetual inclusion. Initial findings support the further development and expansion of a community needs evaluation to understand better how impact made by activists and social entrepreneurs may be affecting and reaching the needs of marginalized individuals in San Francisco and Oakland.

Chapter 1: Introduction
As the need for healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in marginalized communities continues to grow, various movements have emerged that aim to strengthen and advance food sovereignty from the local to global level (Clendenning et al., 2015). Food sovereignty, a term originating in the Peasant Farmers’ Movement in 1993, La Vía Campesina, originally referred specifically to food access and security in rural communities (“La Via Campesina,” n.d.). However, many actors and organizations currently involved in food activism and movements toward food system transformation call on approaches, practices, and strategies that are guided by a food sovereignty framework (Clendenning et al., 2015). Due to its widening appeal, the meaning of food sovereignty varies among the food activists and movement actors. Here, I rely on the following definition of food sovereignty proclaimed in 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty by La Vía Campesina:

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food
systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users” (“La Via Campesina,” n.d.).

It is important to note that food sovereignty transcends food justice in that it aims to rigorously and sustainably transform transnational networks and political action (Clendenning et al., p. 175, 2015). Additionally, food sovereignty is often conflated with and in many ways embedded within the now pervasive local food movement (LFM) (Leventon & Laudan, 2017).

The LFM has expanded and diversified at remarkable rates over the last several decades (Connell, Smithers, & Joseph, 2008; Mars & Schau, 2019). Conjointly, the settings and organizational perspectives around food sovereignty that are often embedded within urban enactments of the LFM have intensified and become more progressive as the need for food access grows. The ongoing housing crisis and challenges involving rapid gentrification have forced people to leave the homes that they’ve long occupied, or that have been passed down from previous generations, as well as many other forms of dispossession that are consequences of rising costs of living (Whittle et.al., 2015). Food insecurity and injustice rise along with such patterns of gentrification and housing displacements. Various forms of urban food activism have surfaced that are aimed at making and keeping these consistently marginalized communities sovereign within the globalized corporate food system (Clendenning et al., 2015).

The purpose of the current study is to explore, describe, and understand scales of impact as they pertain to the move towards urban food sovereignty in two marginalized communities located in the San Francisco Bay Area. The localized strategies pursued by social entrepreneurs who are committed to making the community food sovereign are explored. Particular attention is
directed at the unintended consequences of conflating food sovereignty with the LFM agenda.

Accordingly, I ask: How does localized scale influence the enactment and impact of entrepreneurial strategies for increasing urban food sovereignty?

Many low-income neighborhoods in the Bay Area are considered “food deserts,” or areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food (Dutco et al., 2012). This is mainly due to specific economic development histories and cultural politics of neighborhoods that affect food accessibility (Short et al., 2007). According to a 2015 LILA (low-income and low-access) census tract conducted by the USDA, it was found that an estimated 12.8% or 39.4 million people in the US live in low-income and low-access areas (USDA State-Level Estimates of LILA Population, 2015). The USDA also found that approximately 89.5% of these households were food insecure throughout the year of 2019 (Food Security and Nutrition Assistance, n.d.). The 2018 Bay Area Regional Health Inequalities Initiative found that about 870,000 people in the Bay Area experience food insecurity (Coppins, 2018). Many physical and mental implications arise when people are left without access to nutritious meals, such as higher rates of disease and overall poor health (Coppins, 2018). Food deserts have been found to be a problem arising from market failure and because of this, substantial work in recent years by planners has emerged, pushing for food to be an essential element in urban policymaking and planning for sustainable, healthy, and equitable communities (Bedore, 2010, p. 1418).

With the large and increasing number of people that experience food insecurity, as well as other economic and social injustices that have especially come to light with the current COVID-19 pandemic (Bell, 2021), many actors are organizing within and outside their cities to address food insecurity and injustice. Indeed, community activists, social entrepreneurs, academics, and food producers (e.g., urban farmers) are organizing and creating connections
through community gardens and fridges, community supported agriculture (CSA), nutrition workshops, and other innovative approaches to increase sovereignty. Unfortunately, these types of innovations/interventions are limited by the neoliberal structures that support the corporate food regime and in doing so, perpetuate the many inequalities that confront marginalized communities (Bernstein, 2014; Guthman, 2008; Swales, May, Nuxoll, & Tucker, 2020). Some of the ways in which neoliberalism is operating in the US agriculture and food sectors is through the privatization of land and water rights, the use of free trade agreements to decrease national-level food safety regulations, and the diminishment of food-oriented entitlement programs that exist to address food insecurity (Guthman, 2008). The proposed study will help to answer this question through a qualitative exploration of how localized scale, commonly viewed as the most viable path toward the just transformation of dominant food systems (Mars, 2020), influences urban food sovereignty.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Individuals that experience food insecurity regularly face challenges that include lack of adequate and reliable access to foods that are safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant (Aneman et al., 2009). Consequently, those who are food insecure experience hunger, anxiety, and shame and are forced to engage in the “socially unacceptable procurement of food, including begging, scrounging, relying on charity, exchanging sex for food, stealing food, and other illicit activities” (Anema et. al., 2009, p. 2). Due to the large and increasing amount of people that experience these challenges, the global push for food sovereignty continues to grow (Clendenning et. al., 2015).

Turning to the LFM, local food actors are in part working to advance food sovereignty through various community initiatives and social enterprises that include, but are not limited to
CSA programs, farmers’ market events, community gardens, and educational outreach projects (Clendenning et. al., 2015). The LFM has been defined as

“A contemporary social movement aiming to change the global agricultural landscape by altering the way we understand and interact with the multiple facets of our food system… altering the food chain aims to increase transparency, accountability, and overall sustainability of the economic, social, and environmental sectors of the food system” (Bauermeister, p.124, 2016).

Although the LFM agenda centers on increasing access to locally-produced and -sourced foods, the notion of local food remains poorly defined and vulnerable to co-option by larger neoliberal structures (Ageyeman & McEntee, 2014; Gutham, 2008). Overall, the power and pervasiveness of neoliberal structures that sustain and globalize corporate structures, such as the dominant food system, severely threaten the efficacy and impact of alternative market movements (e.g., LFM) (Clendenning et. al., 2015; Harvey, 2005).

The LFM has been increasingly viewed and studied more as a market-like than activist-like movement to include a pronounced shift away from “long-standing social movement strategies pursuing state-mandated protections for labor, the environment, and the poor, and posits individual entrepreneurialism and consumer choice as the primary pathways to social change” (Alkon, 2014, p.30). Activists turned social entrepreneurs have turned to alternative food businesses as transformative mechanisms under the belief that social and systemic change will come through shifting market demands (Mars and Schau, 2018). Yet, such entrepreneurial strategies for change are precariously positioned between the constraints that stem from movement principles and ideals, and especially remaining rigidly localized in terms of the scale of food production and distribution, and the need to compete within highly competitive marketspaces (Mars, 2020). The influence of this so-called “dilemma of scale” on the efficacy
and impact of localized social enterprises designed to enhance food sovereignty within marginalized urban communities, has been largely overlooked by both scholars and practitioners.

**Neoliberalism and food sovereignty**

Neoliberalism turns on a free market ideology that favors the emergence and reproduction of large-scale market models that favor corporatization and the accumulation of wealth of those in power and supporting nation-states (Harvey, 2005). The entrenchment of neoliberalism over the past four decades has caused “pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005, p.3). Such pervasiveness and entrenchment challenge the adoptability and sustainability of the alternative market-like activities and strategies deployed by those social entrepreneurs who through their organizations and enterprises work to advance the LFM agenda (Guthman, 2008; Mars & Schua, 2018) and, specific to the current study, urban food sovereignty (Clendenning et. al., 2015). Further, neoliberalism reaches farther than market contexts to include “the spaces in between where social movements are often forged” (Clendenning et. al., 2015, p. 174). Such infiltration presents the risk that alternative market activities aimed at transformation more so than wealth accumulation, such as those often associated with the LFM and by extension urban food sovereignty, actually reproduce the very issues or barriers that are intended to be dismantled (Clendenning et. al., 2015).

Neoliberalism has been explored through the ways it supports the corporate food system and limits food sovereignty and justice work. In particular, food sovereignty and its correlating framework emphasize the social implications of neoliberalism that include high rates of food insecurity within marginalized communities, by addressing effects such as: increased communities facing hunger and malnutrition, the continual dispossession of peasants and small
farmers from their lands, and economic blight across rural communities (Bernstein, 2014). While food sovereignty is considered to be mostly a rural-based movement that squarely targets the domination and destructive effects of corporate agriculture on small-scale farmers and rural communities alike, the concept is being increasingly associated with calls for equitable food systems across urban environments. However, there remains a paucity of research pertaining to the everyday challenges and constraints faced by those social entrepreneurs who are working to enhance food sovereignty within marginalized urban communities.

**The impact of localized scale**

Entrepreneurial models that center on the re-localization of food production, distribution, and consumption are core elements of the LFM and push for urban food sovereignty (Mars & Schau, 2018). Entrepreneurial models that prioritize localized scale (e.g., CSAs, farmers’ market, food co-ops) are often depicted as a promising approach to offsetting the inequitable, unhealthy, and unjust effects of the corporatized global food system. In a critical examination of localism, Born and Purcell (2006) articulated a “local trap” that causes localized entrepreneurs and localism scholars alike to “overly-inflate the economic, environmental, and social benefits of localized production, distribution, and consumption as compared to larger scale alternatives” (p.198). To date, however, the consequences of such a trap and what has been similarly referred to as the dilemma of localized scale (Mars, 2020), has yet to be thoroughly studied relative to the efficacy of the LFM and the push for urban food sovereignty.

**Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework**

Sociology of everyday life provides a theoretical lens through which to explore how routine, if not unquestioned social and political mechanisms of oppression and privation influence human agency (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013). Terosky et al. (2014) defines agency as
“strategic and intentional views or actions toward goals that matter” (p. 61). Human agency is expressed through both meaning making and action. Meaning making refers to a planning process that entails individuals anticipating the actions required to gain greater autonomy within particular social settings (Bandura, 1989, 2001). Action refers to how individuals purposefully engage in strategies that create greater opportunities in the social settings for themselves (and in the case of social entrepreneurs those they aim to serve) (Marshall, 2005). Relevant to the current study, social entrepreneurs express their agency by making sense of and enacting everyday practices and strategies that are intended on not only fostering food justice and sovereignty, but also resisting the domination of a corporatized food system (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013).

A conceptual focus on the daily interactions, challenges, and roles taken up by social entrepreneurs, often in otherwise banal and mundane ways, reveals how the impact of localized food sovereignty strategies are limited by neoliberal structures (e.g. scale, efficiency, funding constraints, etc.) (Clendenning et. al., 2015). The following three theoretical constructs of everyday sociology guided my exploration of how localized scale influences the enactment and impact of entrepreneurial strategies for increasing urban food sovereignty: contextuality, reflexivity, and interactions (Adler, Adler, and Fontana, 1987).

Contextuality refers to how individuals (e.g., social entrepreneurs) situate their everyday tasks and interactions relevant to themselves, their environment, and broader societal contexts, as well as their alignment and participation in collective causes (e.g., LFM, urban food sovereignty) (Adler, et al., 1987). The challenges that arise from navigating this balance requires individuals to constantly negotiate their beliefs and values with the pressures and demands of dominate structures and systems. Contextualism, as a mode of analysis, is a key component in studying and understanding the change and impact of organizations involved in localized entrepreneurial
approaches to food sovereignty (Mars, 2020). More specifically, the construct informed my exploration of how social entrepreneurs attempt through their everyday tasks and activities within their organizations and communities to simultaneously produce and distribute food, attempt to fulfill the missions of the organizations in which they are affiliated, maximize impact, and enhance urban food sovereignty.

Reflexivity refers to the circular relationship between the everyday lived realities of individuals and the social and institutional influences and pressures surrounding them (Adler, et al., 1987). Reflexivity explains the ongoing process of negotiation that individuals engage in when balancing everyday tasks with the overarching mission of their organizations, as well as their own individual needs and agendas outside of the organization. Mars (2020) explains “reflexivity involves an ongoing negotiation process that is so routine and normal that overtime it occurs without notice” (p.7). This understanding of reflexivity informed how I recognized and interpreted the ways in which social entrepreneurs routinely and with little questioning adapt to rather than confront factors that insidiously limit the impact they are able to have on food sovereignty within their surrounding community.

Interactions provide the means through which individuals continually arrive at, both internally and externally, their own identity, and in turn work toward accepting or rejecting broader social norms, values, and expectations (Adler, et al., 1987). Analysis and understandings of daily interactions reveal how social entrepreneurs may situate themselves, as individuals, and their transformative work, as well as the organizations they lead, in relation to their personal needs, views, and positions (Mars, 2020). Here, I considered how the pressures and limitations of neoliberalism (and by extension the corporatized food system) shape the everyday activities and
practices of social entrepreneurs and how this is being navigated to create a balance between resistance and progress toward urban food sovereignty.

Chapter 4: Methods

Research design and setting

To conduct this study, I used a qualitative, single case study design (Baškarada, 2014; Yin, 2014) to explore organizational approaches to enhancing food sovereignty in 2 marginalized communities located in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of the communities is East Oakland, which is disproportionately affected by high rates of chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes, obesity, and mental disorder (Chow et.al., 2018). It was found that 48% of residents live below the poverty line, with median household incomes of less than $30,000 (Chow et. al., 2018). There are an estimated 17% of unauthorized immigrants in East Oakland, and the poverty rate is 10% higher for unauthorized immigrants compared to those that are native (Marcelli & Pastor, 2015). USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (2015) has found that although East Oakland has historically been a diverse majority-minority community of color, it is now reaching Latino majority (p.2). The second community, located in San Francisco’s Mission District, has been historically recognized for its roots in Latinx culture, arts, and residency since the late 1960’s (Gil & Feng, 2017). Displacement due to increased cost of living has caused the neighborhood’s Hispanic population to decrease from 60% in 2000 to approximately 41% (Gil & Feng, 2017). The neighborhood’s Median Household Income (MHI) is $73,610, and Latinos residing in this district average an MHI of $43,944 (Gil & Feng, 2017). It has been found that at least 1 in 4 San Francisco residents are at risk of food insecurity due to low income and soaring living costs (2018 Assessment of Food Security).
Figure 1 A map of the broader San Francisco that highlights the Mission District. The Mission District was part of the case for this study (Google, n.d.,a).

Figure 2 A map that highlights the East Oakland region. East Oakland was part of the case for this study (Google n.d.,b).
Sample

The study sample is composed of 7 activists, food producers, and organization leaders who are working to enhance food sovereignty within the community of focus. These actors, who hereafter are referred to as social entrepreneurs, were purposively recruited based on their involvement in food sovereignty work within the community (Patton, 2002). More specifically, I used a maximum variation strategy (Mertens, 2015) to develop a sample that is representative of the various approaches and organization-types that collectively constitute food sovereignty work in the community. Secondarily, I used a chain sampling strategy (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) that entailed participants referring me to others in the community involved in food sovereignty work. I engaged these sampling strategies until theoretical saturation was reached (i.e., patterns were consistently being repeated and no new insights were being generated) (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with each of the social entrepreneurs composing the sample. The protocol that guided each interviewed was composed of open-ended questions that together spanned three theoretical constructs of everyday sociology (contextuality, reflexivity, interactions). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted over the Zoom platform using a password protected link. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data were analyzed both deductively and inductively. Deductively, analysis relied on a structured coding framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that was developed using a combination of food sovereignty and localized scale concepts and the three everyday sociology constructs. Inductively, I used an open coding strategy (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to capture
insights relevant to the research question, but not otherwise able to be revealed through the
deductive framework. Both deductive and inductive analysis occurred through multiple rounds
beginning with the axial coding of each interview, as well as across all the interviews in order to
generate inter-related codes (Spiggle, 1994). These preliminary inter-related codes were then
continually refined throughout several additional rounds of deductive and inductive analysis until
a final set of findings were reached. Additionally, debriefing with my thesis advisor, Dr.
Matthew Mars, occurred through the analytical process, which included coming to consensus on
the final set of findings.

As someone that grew up in the East Bay Area, facing the challenges that succumb to
living in a neighborhood without adequate food access, it’s vital that I state my positionality
(Creswell, 2007) as the primary conductor of the current study. Due to my own experiences,
there is a potential for bias in the study, however the trustworthiness techniques implemented
bring rigor to the methods that were utilized and reduce the effects of my own bias on the
analytical process.

As with all qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalizable past the boundaries
of the case that defines this study, which are the organizational approaches to enhancing food
sovereignty in the two marginalized communities located in the San Francisco Bay Area. The
data and findings that emerged from the study are unique to the daily practices, routines, and
realities of the organizations that are represented in the sample. Researcher triangulation was
performed in order to bring greater trustworthiness to the findings, which entailed regular
briefings with my thesis advisor throughout the analytical process (Leech & Onwuegbuzie,
2007). I also used reflective memo writing to increase the depth and clarity of the findings.
(Saldaña, 2016). Next, I present the findings using a thick description approach, which increases the potential transferability of the insights generated beyond the immediate setting of the study.

**Chapter 5: Findings**

Although the Bay Area social entrepreneurs involved in the food sovereignty movement are pushing for food access and community resilience, they each associate the localization of food production and distribution with food system transformation. Despite the many challenges they face in the decision to remain localized in scale, they believe it to be the only efficacious and just option. The four features described below characterize how the commitment to localized scale influences the enactment and impact of the entrepreneurial strategies these community change agents take when working to increase food sovereignty in their urban communities: *Mission rigidity, Financial constraints, Organizational adaptation and capacity,* and *Perpetual inclusion.*

**Mission rigidity**

The decisions and operational strategies of the social entrepreneurs are heavily influenced by their organizations’ missions. This is rooted in the assumption that the mission statements contain the insights needed to reveal and choose the “right” choices and strategies when faced with decisions surrounding opportunities and limitations. Not surprisingly, the missions are by design squarely in conflict with the mainstream food system and the neoliberal ideology in which it is entrenched. The confinement of operational activities to the localized scale is a common element of this oppositional positions that runs across the set of missions. Yet, this rigid commitment to localized scale complicates the everyday work of the entrepreneurs as they must continually negotiate and rationalize decisions to accept or reject opportunities based on
fundamental principles, even when the potential outcomes can introduce possibilities for enhancing food sovereignty within their communities (and sometimes beyond).

One entrepreneur/local farmer and member of one of the largest operating community-based farms in San Francisco, explains their internal process of considering new opportunities for growth in the light of “mission drift.” They state,

Informally on site, we have conversations where we consider new opportunities. We literally just talk like what is our mission and is it (the opportunity) in our mission, if not and we think it’s important, we talk about which organizational partner we can invite to perform this function. If it is mission drift, we identify that and politely decline. Similarly, in a more formal way, part of the way the group processes is in bimonthly meetings where… we present the opportunity, our perspective, the pros and cons in the context of the mission, and then the team debates.

One of the founders of this same farm explains the structure of the bimonthly meetings by stating,

Now we are a modified consensus and now we have a vote. If something is brought to the table or someone wants to spearhead a project, then we have to get two-thirds of the group on board. I think it has worked well and better because we always strive for that diversity in our decision-making. So sometimes doing something that you don’t fully support or maybe agree with can be a good thing because it’s still moving us forward if it’s in our mission statement.

Both of these social entrepreneurs explained that their adopted practices and approaches were the most efficacious option available for addressing food security concerns in their local community. The mission statement of the farm is explicitly focused on increasing food security and educating the local neighborhood on ways to become their own food producers – a highly localized aspiration. However, one of the leaders of the farm indicated that there is little to no resident participation in their bi-monthly meetings, which severely compromises the feasibility of the mission. This leader expressed their own frustration and described a seemingly collectively understood disconnect as follows:
The leadership at [anonymous] today is socioeconomically homogenous. I think we all have stable jobs [outside of the organization], it’s majority white and the neighborhood next door is almost exclusively POC, vast majority Black. In order to live there, one has to be among the lowest income in San Francisco. So there’s this huge gap around who is making the visioning statements for the farm, who’s doing the strategic planning and the people that are actually consuming that food. Like yes, we make an effort to listen and ask what they want, but they’re not sitting in on our meetings yet. One of the challenges of COVID is that our meetings have been called off and we are not meeting in person, so we can’t show up in the community that way.

This same organizational leader went on to say,

It's not like there is a lack of invitations. I'm aware that there have been many bridges built and many olive branches extended in from the farm to the community over 15 years and nothing has stuck. One thing that I heard about the neighborhood next door from one of our Community Partners is that they provide Social Services to the apartment, so unless there's some kind of compensation, these folks are not interested and that of course makes a lot of sense because we are talking about America. Like do we expect Black people to come and do manual agricultural labor for free? Like what kind of a request is that, it's ridiculous.

Another member of the organization’s leadership team lamented,

There are just so many ways that [anonymous] Farms could be doing more work that is more aligned with our mission and the obstacles to that are frustrating and persistent, and also just hard for our course.

The lack of resident participant is an apparent misalignment between the needs and demands of the community members and the organization’s hyper-localized approach to enhancing food sovereignty within the area. Yet, the entrepreneurs made no mention of the need or willingness to reconsider or alter the approach the farm was taking to deliver on its mission.

Financial constraints

The social entrepreneurs are choosing to adopt radical, localized, and grassroots approaches to addressing the needs of those living in their communities who are marginalized by the dominant food system. As just described, these choices are deeply and rigidly rooted in the missions of their organizations. Consequently, the entrepreneurs are confronted with unique financial challenges and constraints that dictate their everyday choices and strategies. These
challenges and constraints are particularly pronounced given they operate in one of the most expensive cities in the country. Overall, the entrepreneurs indicated in various ways that the choice to stay situated within their neighborhoods and communities wasn’t necessarily a choice at all, but rather a requirement to do the work that they know how to do and that they believe is needed. A program manager in a non-profit organization that operates a network of community gardens explained the core of their mission-centered approach is “really rooted in building relations with the neighbors and in the community. It’s all about relationships, in terms of our presence in the gardens and all of the projects we have.” They went on to indicate that they routinely confront financial challenges without giving consideration to how to perform their work and that of their organization differently, or to expand their operations in ways that transcend the boundaries of their immediate community and create new opportunities for generating much needed resources.

Another entrepreneur/local farmer described tensions in their organization when potential opportunities for accepting philanthropic gifts are discussed in meetings. For example, they stated,

Another team member who is helping us write a grant was on the call and said I am really curious how the farm is going to handle it when you know there are the most millionaires per capita in San Francisco than anywhere else in the states, I am not actually sure that’s true, but the point is like this is a really wealthy place so the day is going to come that there are donors that want to give us larger gifts and are there going to be strings attached and if so, are we in a position to turn them down and at what point does it cross a line where we are actually willing to compromise our mission and sell our soul, to keep the doors open.

They went on to describe an example of how they negotiate and understand financial limitations relevant to the organization’s mission by stating,

I think maybe our crew was very confident that we feel so close to the mission, so motivated by it, and protective of it that if a donor were offering us financial support in exchange for or they weren’t yet acquainted with the pretty politically radical part of our
mission that would be a conversation that we would need to have with them before they cut a check. We were also saying if they hope that this would give them some kind of say or power over the organization as a result of their gift, then we would have to think long and hard about if we could accept. Fortunately, and unfortunately, we haven’t had to cross that bridge. We have not received any single donation larger than $5000 and that is both individual and corporate. All gifts have come to us no strings attached.

Interestingly, the organization was not active in generating mission-centered gifts from external parties. Instead, concern rested on retaining an unwillingness to negotiate the terms of gifts, even when facing financial uncertainties. Here again, mission rigidity to remain hyper-local both in terms of organizational impact and control points to the problematic nature of rigid mission adherence.

Such rigidity remained intact throughout the COVID-19 pandemic when shortages in volunteers and funding within the communities being served were especially high. One entrepreneur/community educator stated,

We're definitely short staffed as far as money to pay for someone there [their grassroots organization and community farm] full time. I personally would like to be there full-time, but there’s just no money currently. It might change by the end of the year. That’s where we're hoping.

Another entrepreneur with an organization focused on community education and outreach specific to health and nutrition expressed a similar challenge when asked about limitations in meeting the understood demands and scaling,

I mean being understaffed and underfunded. There are plenty of folks that we know that belong on the team and who have the skills to write our educational curriculum, they have the skills for example to coordinate with elementary schools, and build out that kind of programming and I would say I think because my co-director and myself, are wearing so many hats and the core volunteers that help us fulfill the site’s basic functions, they do this as a volunteer job, like they have families and full-time work, their capacity is incredibly limited. So, for us to fundraise everything just takes forever, like simple things take a really long time.

They continued on to explain,
We only have funds that will get us through the next nine months and that’s a scary feeling. There is a lot to say about the energetics of it and how there isn’t a feeling of security or stability when we can’t get ahead financially and in order to do that we would have to switch our focus onto money, when actually we would like to focus on food and building our educational curriculum and there are partnerships with two Indigenous nonprofits that we are really excited about. We could use more hands-on deck and a lot more expert advice on how to fundraise and manage a nonprofit at our juncture and point of growth.

This entrepreneur indicated their organization is at the point of thinking differently about how they approach their work and the need/promise of expanding the scope of their work and diversifying their funding streams. Yet, no strategies were being developed to pursue said needs and opportunities with the tone instead being more indicative of what could be versus what needs to be.

**Organizational capacity and adaptation**

Here, collective capacity refers to the range of possible ways in which an organization can have impact on food sovereignty given available resources, staff, and funding. The social entrepreneurs consistently identified collective capacity within their organizations as either a challenge or point of uncertainty, the “wants” and “shoulds” in terms of what they believed their organizations were responsible for, instead of what they were actually capable of. Knowledge surrounding the capacity of each individual organization seemed to be a developing process, especially with the added challenges of COVID-19. For example, an entrepreneur/community farmer described a keen awareness and concern over the limited capacity of their organization. They explained,

It's really capacity through the organization, to the partnerships we have built out on many farms and some of the other local school gardens and Urban Sprouts, is another organization we work with. They already have similar principals and we're all trying to do something similar in different ways. Then we do have other folks that just show up, like other organizations and have ideas. Sometimes we want to work with them, but we really don't have the capacity.
In this instance, the entrepreneur (as well as others in the organization) adapted rather than strived to build upon the current capacity. Accordingly, they settled on maximizing what was currently possible over innovating in ways aimed at scaling impact. The entrepreneur continued to explain such organizational adaptation when saying,

We produce food and we organize and educate people, there's no way we can produce enough food to feed everyone, even the block. It's more like our focus is now on this is what plants look like and really emphasizing the environmental justice element.

The same social entrepreneur illuminated one exception to this adaptation over an innovation pattern, which centered on a collaboration between organizations that, in various ways, work to enhance food sovereignty across the community. In fact, all of the interviewees indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted such inter-organizational collaboration.

For example, one organizational leader/local farmer stated,

We are already producing as much as we can responsibly, like we can’t even provide as much as we would like to the three distribution channels that already exist, so there wasn’t much more for us to do…There was one pivot we made which was [anonymous] and I doing a lot less explaining, and a lot more manual labor. So we weren’t teaching anymore, we were just doing the farming. Something else that changed is we got an opportunity to work with two other food justice non-profits in San Francisco and were invited by [anonymous] agricultural extension that operates the farm. They didn’t actually have much food growing at the time and knew us, so they said “we have mostly COVID risk 55+ residents, a lot of whom are undocumented, many of whom are Latinx and we want to make sure these folks don’t have to go to the grocery store, but that they still have fresh local food, can you provide us with groceries every week?”

Another social entrepreneur who works with a non-profit urban farm focused on youth development described a similar experience that involved adjusting to the pandemic through inter-organizational collaboration. They stated,

Since we started aggregating and teaming up with other farmers, we were able to have access to so much more produce. So right now, we aren’t pushing to be a production farm, it’s more of an outdoor classroom or educational farm.
In other cases, pandemic response heightened awareness of the limited capacity confronting some organizations. For instance, one social entrepreneur/community organizer described the effects of the added stresses brought on by COVID-19 within their organization. They stated,

Pre-COVID we were doing a lot more work with other environmental justice organizations, both locally and nationally, but since COVID, we've really just shrunk a lot of our working relationships to what we can really handle. We've taken up some fairly strict and mentally exhausting COVID protocols. As far as the three of us who are organizing, it's always being on top of other people to make sure they are being safe, washing their hands and masks and all that. People were pretty good about it, but I think as an organizer, it just kind of added another level of emotional awareness, or not emotional, organizational awareness, where you're trying to stay on top of safety, on top of everything that you're trying to do.

They acknowledged a major, but much needed change since the pandemic began through the following example:

On our Sundays, that means one of the three of us is just doing hygiene. It's kind of like a hygiene patrol person to reinforce our safety values. That takes one person out of labor and just focusing on cleaning and making sure people have what they need when they need it. When we do work with folks, we want folks to really look at our organizing values. We're trying to restore a deep connection between community members, people and the land. Then we really want folks working with us to mimic that. We're on occupied, colonial territory, unceded territory, so we definitely want people to acknowledge that.

This particular case again underscores the power organizational mission has on organizational decision making and ultimately adaptation throughout periods of extreme crisis. Moreover, it points to a firm pattern of adaption over innovation, even in moments of extreme crisis when organizational capacities become especially limited.

**Perpetual inclusion**

Considerations involving the many facets of community inclusion are crucial to enhancing food sovereignty at the localized level. Innovation is another much needed characteristic of organizations with radical agendas, especially in light of the challenges that arise when working within vast systems of oppression, such as neoliberalism. The social
entrepreneurs continually prioritize building awareness of what inclusion means to them and implement that meaning with unwavering commitment. In some cases, such implementation prompts innovative approaches and strategies. For example, one social entrepreneur who has developed unique and powerful ideas to ensure inclusion within their organization’s farm explained,

The farm, it's structured in a way that it's really a collective farm structure versus a community farm. One of the things that's super important to us about that is that community farms or community gardens reinforce settler ideas of land. What I mean by that is that you're not really allowed to be part of the community garden, unless you have a plot. It's really hard for people who don't have a plot to have access to the garden. That tends to happen in most community gardens. I've been to a few where there're slight variations where people can become members without a plot, but I've only really seen two of those. One of our goals is to really organize people in the space itself through that. We don't have any borders, we don't have any gates, we don't have anything.

This same organization has innovated in order to better meet the needs of those that they aim to serve by taking many varying aspects into consideration, such as the environmental conditions surrounding the farm, preventative measures for possible earthquakes, the cultures and diversity of those they are creating space for, and the possibilities of sharing knowledge that is, without boundaries. The social entrepreneur further emphasized the importance of awareness in their ability to stay inclusive when saying,

We really want to make our interactions just long lasting. The intergenerational, intercultural are two big things that we really try to emphasize. There's just so much knowledge that can be passed down between generations and different ways to look at the same problem. That is one thing, we really aim to make it a safe space. There's a lot of organizing that's already happened within [anonymous organization], that's kind of already... Anything from sexual orientation, pronouns, disability, language, immigration status, housing, being able to incorporate people that fall into different intersectionality, but also just really emphasizes that it's all important and the garden is one way to bring it all together.

Another important part of inclusion within the food sovereignty movement is determining what to plant and harvest. The social entrepreneurs routinely explained that their strategy when
making these decisions entails simply talking with those in the community who use their services in order to gain a greater awareness of how to best meet their needs and wants. For example, the previously mentioned social entrepreneur with the non-profit urban youth farm stated, “What we plant is determined by the kids and what their families are eating. We would like to know the ingredients that go into the meals that families are sharing.” Yet, community member needs and wants must be negotiated with other values and mission-centered objectives. For instance, another social entrepreneur/farmer explained their decision-making process and considerations around what to plant and harvest relevant to sustainability and impact when stating,

One is what [plants] does well in this climate, so of course we are trying to produce the maximum amount of food that we can for the sake of feeding the most people that we can without crossing a line in terms of sustainability and our regenerative relationship with the earth. We want to make sure that we are returning nutrients to the soil and not being too extractive… it matters to us to choose the crops that will have high yields. For example, we prioritize bunching greens over something like broccoli because broccoli, there are varieties like broccoli florets, but generally speaking if we are growing broccoli we cut the crown and not the fruit and yes we can harvest the leaves, but if we have something like collards, the community can harvest that for months.

This same social entrepreneur was quick to point out that they still try to remain responsive to community needs and wants. They went on to say,

Who generally are the populations eating this food? And when we are on site, who do we see doing the community harvesting? What are the communities that we are distributing to through our partnership channels? And also, when we have an opportunity to engage with community harvesters and chat with the people at our food pantry, when we can connect with our partners at another distribution site, we ask them like what is moving and what were people excited about. And you know, if we send you loquats, do we also need to send a recipe to make it accessible? So yeah there is an ear open for community feedback and preferences and when somebody from our neighborhood next door comes up to the site and says “I would love if you all grew rutabaga” we order those seeds the next day.

In general, inclusivity as a core value of the organizations represented in this study, as well as throughout the broader food sovereignty discourse, continually shapes day-to-day decisions and
strategies of the social entrepreneurs. Returning to everyday sociology, the entrepreneurs (and the organizations they represent) are so tightly situated in their understanding of how food sovereignty should be pursued that they reflexively make routine (but consequential) decisions based on a hyper-localized sphere of perspectives and interactions. This convergence of localized contextuality, reflexivity, and interactions obscures the entrepreneurs’ abilities to objectively analyze their impact and strategically consider alternative approaches to enhancing food sovereignty across (and potentially beyond) the communities (and overarching movement) in which they are situated.

**Chapter 6: Discussion**

The findings demonstrate the ways in which the routine work, everyday realities, and experiences of Bay Area activists and social entrepreneurs are influenced and motivated by their commitment to serving marginalized communities. In doing so, they work to increase food security, share the knowledge needed to more autonomously access healthy and sustainable foods, and bring visibility to systems of oppression. Next, I consider the immediate and longer-term implications of neoliberalism on the impact the social entrepreneurs and their organizations are having on the communities they aim to serve. An everyday perspective is developed that contributes a deeper understanding of the tenuous balance between the social merits of grassroots and activist work and impact relative to food sovereignty and community development.

The findings have made clear the incompatibility of entangling food sovereignty with the local food movement. There is an incompatibility between the foundation needed for food sovereignty to operate within a community and for the local food movement to thrive within this realm. The social entrepreneurs all expressed in slightly varying ways, the limitations and challenges that arise with the need to feed a community within local boundaries. Returning to the
definition of food sovereignty utilized for the current study and what is called for, it’s clear that localization is not an inherent element of food sovereignty and may in some cases be problematic and/or restrictive. One social entrepreneur specifically addressed the success of teaming up with a rural farm, and how that has allowed their community-based site to focus solely on education and youth empowerment, as well as serve the original intended purpose of being an outdoor classroom. Not only has this allowed the organization to conduct work that better aligns with their mission, but the collaboration has allowed the organization to distribute more food to the community than what was in their capacity to grow. The findings revealed that localism is one potential mechanism but does not inherently or exclusively lead to food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is not measured on the scale of localism, and implications arise that obscure the actions of social entrepreneurs and organizations that feel the need to conduct all of their work within the boundaries of the LFM.

The current study is not the first exploration of neoliberalism and its influence on activist/grassroots level work that entails localized food production, distribution, and consumption. Although scholars agree that alternatives are needed to the current food system, which reproduces inequalities and fails to address the needs of communities, they have critiqued whether the “sustainable, local alternatives that activists recommend are sufficient for broad social transformation” (Alkon, p.27, 2014).

The current study brings to the forefront the challenges and struggles that neoliberalism imposes directly upon the everyday practices, interactions, and realities of activists, social entrepreneurs, and their organizations. It also brings to surface how imposition subsides their capacities to both create impact and sustain their livelihoods.
The constraints of neoliberalism largely limit the work of social entrepreneurs in various ways, sometimes to the point where they unintentionally reproduce the issues that they are intending to dismantle (Reese, 2014). Further, the decision to stay local in one of the most expensive cities in the world adds a further layer of constraint in affecting change. The rationales of why the entrepreneurs so rigidly and unquestionably adhere to the fundamental principles and ideologies of the food sovereignty agenda are admirable, which center on building alternative, hyper-localized food systems within the communities that they have come to know best, regardless of the financial, emotional, and organizational risks and tolls. Nevertheless, this same adherence dominates their everyday realities in ways that make them unwilling and/or unaware of the need to consider alternative strategies that challenge the logic or assumptions of their hyper-localized strategies, even when impact is being compromised.

The increased emergence of radical and transformative food movements has provided more options to those that are not served by the current food system and are now being considered as solutions to food inaccessibility (Reese, 2017). However, although organizations have emerged with agendas aiming to support and uplift marginalized communities, there has been much skepticism on the execution of their work and how they may be reproducing oppressive ideals (Alkon, 2014). In discussing the possibilities of community empowerment through gardening, Reese (2017) explains that they could serve as sites for community-controlled food production and youth development, but more often the practice “becomes exclusionary, used in service to neoliberal agendas, or a band aid for larger structural inequalities that cannot be solved by gardening” (p.410).

Ways in which activists may be reproducing ideas rooted in oppression that do not align with the work that they are intending to do, can surface if food access is only understood as
providing communities with education and food that enforces ideals of “healthy” and “nutritious” food alone. This is what Reese (2020) describes as “purity politics.” The enforcement of purity politics causes social entrepreneurs, and activists more generally to neglect the desires of people, specifically Black people, by not asking them what they like to eat and therefore, neglecting their needs. Reese (2020) stated the following in a public talk on November 6th, 2020, “Delight is (should be) central to any notions of food justice. To neglect delight reduces Black people’s needs to only being biological, stripping away the human emotions, feelings, and experiences that exceed the biological.” By explaining the ways in which the current food justice frameworks and movements tend to center cleanliness and diets, Reese (2020) emphasizes the need for social entrepreneurs and activists to understand that their efforts must nourish lives and not just bodies. While Reese’s specific focus is on Black people and communities, the notion of purity politics is also generally applicable to marginalized peoples and communities to include those in urban communities that lack food sovereignty. In addition to unintentionally limiting the scale of impact, hyper-localized approaches to food sovereignty may also inadvertently foster purity politics.

Tension at the community level between the social entrepreneurs working to enhance food sovereignty and those they aim to serve, can reveal itself to be problematic for many reasons (Reese, 2017). To understand what is needed in affecting the change required to enhance food sovereignty within marginalized communities, Reese (2014) places an emphasis on Black geographies and geographies of self-reliance, which “almost always reflects an interest in and commitment to community, despite any social and interpersonal ills that may plague it” (p.408). She continues to explain the erasure that occurs,

“because of the presumed ‘nothingness’ that is embedded in understandings of so-called ‘food deserts’, food justice advocated outside of these neighborhood spaces often
overlook or do not see the ways in which residents make ‘ways out of no way’ that are embedded in their own food security and reflect their hopes and desires for their communities more broadly” (p.409).

This phenomenon became clear in interviews within the current study involving Bay Area social entrepreneurs when one organization explained the complete absence of community involvement in decision-making processes. One activist and local farmer stated, “We are actively holding the question of how to balance community inclusion and organizational maintenance. I’m sad to say that the community is not really included, so there is no balance in that way, but we are working on it.” They further explained the many efforts that have been made to ask and involve community members to participate, but none do. This creates a thriving tension between principle and practice, allowing a major disconnect to form between the organization and their surrounding community.

When imagining the possibilities of a food system that doesn’t steal imaginations and maintain hierarchies, Dr. Reese (2020) explains that we can be given the space to push ourselves to channel curiosity and ask how people feel, as well as listen to their desires, likes, and dislikes. Dr. Reese moves us to see kitchens and neighborhoods as spaces of power, where communities can create conditions for nourishment, putting consumption together with production. A possibility similar to this is one that is shared among the social entrepreneurs in this study, and yet the challenge of involving the community and balancing organizational maintenance has kept this possibility out of reach. Creating conditions of nourishment centers connecting with community members to build on pasts and future paths to develop a food system.

Solutions that can address the challenge of practice v. principal that is faced by these social entrepreneurs and activists, is rooted in the need for closer collaborations between organizations to expand impact. Collaboration is crucial in order to scale impact beyond the
hyper-localized boundaries of specific organizations and micro-communities (i.e., specific neighborhoods) and challenge the notion that food has to be produced within a particular locale in order for food sovereignty to be achieved.

A follow up study is recommended that includes community member perspectives on the ways that impact created by social entrepreneurs, activists, and organizations are affecting those that they are aiming to serve. The design should include interviews with community members through 1:1 interviews and/or small focus groups. Data should be analyzed deductively and inductively, in a similar manner to the current study.

Scaling impact becomes a tool in collaborating with other activists, organizations, and social entrepreneurs working with similar motives on the path toward food sovereignty. Frameworks of food sovereignty rely on community resilience and empowerment. There is plenty of important and impactful work being conducted every day by those involved in transformative food movements. It’s crucial that this work is considered, and possibilities remain imagined, as awareness grows of new ways to empower and move communities forward.

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