

LOCAL RESILIENCE AND THE FOOD DESERT ISSUE IN THE UNITED STATES FROM 2010 TO 2023

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Master's Thesis

June 24, 2024

Number of words (excl. Bibliography and footnotes): 21.677

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ABSTRACT

Food deserts are a problematic feature of the United States that has been on the radar since the 1990s and is still the center of many debates in academia and politics alike. This thesis analyzes an understudied area of this debate, that is the discourse behind the local communities who inhabit those areas. Unfortunately, although the inhabitants are often mentioned by media and academia/newspaper articles, they are seldom at the core of research. This thesis explores and analyzes a variety of accounts of local people, such as non-profit organizations and smaller businesses' websites, pieces of interviews, and documentaries. These are analyzed by carrying out a qualitative and CDA analysis with the intent to identify a pattern of behavior and the impact that the local communities have on the food desert areas. The research shows that the local discourse is complex and fragmented and ranges from a more mainstream health and diet approach to a more historically charged perspective of food apartheid and food sovereignty. These findings fill the scholarly gap and give an insight into the food desert communities, unraveling their internal divisions, their resilience, and their solutions to the problem. This study concludes that each member of the food desert has its own interpretation of the issue that leads to a variety of solutions and creates a somewhat disjointed front. By studying the communities more in-depth, the food desert debate can be enriched and updated and more effective solutions – fitting of local populations' needs – can be conceived.

KEYWORDS: food desert, Black community, food sovereignty, food access, urban inequality

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank a number of people who helped me both personally and academically in the process of writing my thesis.

I would like to thank my supervisor Enrike van Wingerden, who offered a great deal of support, advice and patience throughout this journey which has been crucial for the completion of this work.

I would also like to thank my Global History and International Relations colleagues, with whom I shared a wonderful academic and personal experience and who encouraged me at every step of this thesis.

Finally, I would like to thank my closest friends and family, who supported me through this – alas, at times bumpy – road and stuck by my side during the hardest times.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Whole Foods opened a store in Englewood, Chicago as part of a broader national initiative to provide higher-quality food to struggling neighborhoods.¹ With the aid of city subsidies and tax-increment financing, the store planned to sell groceries at prices affordable for neighborhood residents, lower than those at other Whole Foods locations.² The appearance of such a popular and healthy grocery store would have not solved the issue of a food desert in the neighborhood infamous for poverty and violence in its entirety. Nevertheless, the residents welcomed the change. Most importantly, the local church – Englewood’s Canaan Community Church – was proud of its efforts as it was mostly due to its perseverance that the highly neglected neighborhood was able to open a grocery store known for its high-quality produce. Yet, only six years later, local media reported that “[...] Whole Foods announced it was closing the Englewood store in April 2022”.³

The issue of food deserts is neither new nor forgotten. Since it appeared on the pages of health journals in the ‘90s, it has been an ongoing topic of discussion and debate among scholars and community advocates alike for the past thirty years. As of now, the issue of food accessibility and the lack of healthy (if any) grocery stores in the United States – specifically in the rural and urban areas – is still present, as many stores close and force many neighborhoods to live through food insecurity and/or an unhealthy lifestyle.⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture website, food deserts are “a low-income tract where either a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store”.⁵ The website provides a tracking tool - as well as a map – which highlights a surprisingly big part of the overall territory of the United States of America.⁶

¹ Aimee Levitt and Naomi Waxman, ‘Whole Foods Is Leaving Englewood’, *Chicago Eater*, 2 May 2022, <https://chicago.eater.com/2022/5/2/23053317/whole-foods-englewood-grocery-ravenswood-restaurant-delivery-bombobar-marz-malort-spritz>.

² Levitt and Waxman, ‘Whole Foods is Leaving Englewood’.

³ Anne Ford, ‘A Church and Community Partnership Helps Bring Fresh Groceries to a Chicago Food Desert | Faith and Leadership’, 19 February 2019, <https://faithandleadership.com/church-and-community-partnership-helps-bring-fresh-groceries-chicago-food-desert>.

⁴ Dave Olverson, ‘ZONING | The Death of the Neighborhood Grocery Store’, *Southern Urbanism Quarterly*, 13 July 2023, <https://southernurbanism.org/blog/spring-summer-2023-the-death-of-the-neighborhood-grocery-store>.

⁵ ‘Where Are Food Deserts in the U.S.?’ accessed 2 January 2024, <http://199.135.94.241/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=74935>.

⁶ ‘USDA ERS - Go to the Atlas’, accessed 2 January 2024, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>.

Although these food deserts are spread throughout the country, the majority are located in the southwestern counties which are usually considered to host a greater part of the non-white population in addition to being the ones recognized as below the poverty line.⁷ Big southern states such as Texas and New Mexico especially struggle with food insecurity. However, food deserts do not necessarily interest only a part of the United States. As a matter of fact, a food desert can be hidden within a city. Take for instance New York City; some neighborhoods, such as South Bronx or Hell's Kitchen are food deserts, however, New York *City per se* is not. Thus, while the South is certainly more prone to have all the criteria (low access and low financial means) to be classified as a food desert area, the issue is not inherent to one region of the USA.

In 2010 around 14.5 percent of U.S. households struggled, not with the availability of healthy food or access to a supermarket or a grocery store, but with the ability to put food on the table, as their monthly income was insufficient to cover general food costs. In the meantime, the United States is listed once again as one of the top ten richest countries in the world, ranking in ninth place as of 2023.⁸

Even though the terms “food desert” and “food insecurity” are frequently used interchangeably, they are substantially different. People hit by food insecurity - who can also be living in an area deemed as a food desert - often find ingenious ways to get by such as food stamps or soup kitchens. In contrast, food deserts are places that are structurally hit by inequality. Decades of urban and racial discrimination created isolated areas or “ghettos”. Afro-American and Indigenous people, and often immigrants, were forced to move into these neighborhoods and live under significantly worse conditions than the white population. Thus, food deserts can suffer from food insecurity issues as a result of poor urban planning due to discriminatory politics which limited food access in these areas. However, food insecurity is not inherently an issue of food deserts since it strictly means not having access to a sufficient amount of food to satisfy basic needs.⁹ As Kenneth H. Kolb

⁷ US Census Bureau, ‘Census Bureau Releases Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates for States, Counties and School Districts’, *Census.gov*, accessed 2 January 2024, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/saipe.html>.

⁸ Luca Ventura, ‘Richest Countries in the World 2023’, *Global Finance Magazine*, 21 December 2023, <https://gfmag.com/data/richest-countries-in-the-world/>.

⁹ ‘Food Insecurity’, *Public Health Reports* 131, no. 5 (24 August 2016): 655–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354916664154>.

says in his book *Retail Inequality. Reframing The Food Desert Debate* (2022): “It was about respect.”¹⁰

While main notions about lack of accessibility, financial struggles and underlying issues of racism and inequality are already part of the food desert debate, I intend to distance myself from governmental initiatives as well as not dive deeper into the intimate stories of individuals’ diets. This thesis will closely analyze bigger local actions such as the introduction of community gardens, local educational efforts to healthier lifestyles, and similar and their impact on food accessibility in food deserts themselves. Thus, my main research question will be:

- **In what ways have local communities challenged and offered food alternatives to food deserts in the United States (2010 – 2023)?**

To support my main research question, I will be answering three main sub-questions which will help me to advance in my research. The following sub-questions will be answered respectively in the second, third and fourth chapters of this thesis:

1. How have local communities in the US voiced their concerns about unequal food access?
2. What kinds of local community actions against food deserts have taken place in the US?
3. To what extent have these local community actions changed the state of food deserts?

1.1. [Academical and societal relevance](#)

This thesis investigates the impact that local communities and advocates in food deserts can have and more specifically, whether local actions improve overall food access and/or offer feasible food alternatives. Studying local action in food deserts is important since it is a relatively understudied area in the academic debate. Even though more recent articles do give proper attention to the intimate side of the food desert issue, they fail to establish a pattern and analyze the local community as a whole and not as separate paths of action. When the local initiatives are analyzed,

¹⁰ Kenneth H. Kolb, *Retail Inequality. Reframing The Food Desert Debate*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 50 – 51

they usually do not give a deeper analysis of how the actors address the problem and why they decide to act in a certain way. Racial aspects and inherent issues with urban inequality have been already explored in academia, as well as the futility of simpler solutions such as that of building a supermarket, as mentioned at the beginning of this section.

However, the very inhabitants of the food deserts and their impact on their neighborhoods are rarely mentioned. The locals are usually featured in newspaper articles or documentaries merely as part of the collateral damage of living in a food desert. Yet, there is no straightforward way of addressing the local community, as it is continuously evolving and showcases a variety of different opinions and approaches about this particular issue. As a matter of fact, part of the local community is distancing itself from the very term “food desert” and is making an effort to establish a new and updated vocabulary that reflects the historical disclinations of those areas. Possible solutions do not only tackle the absence of grocery stores or food distribution systems but also go as far as to advocate for land reclamation and control over food production and distribution. Local communities cannot be reduced solely to farm stands and gardens, although these are also aspects that have to and will be considered.

This thesis focuses specifically on the time period from 2010 to 2023 as it appears to contain more change and debate among the food desert community as a whole. Prior to 2010, food deserts were already analyzed from health and racial points of view, however, the local community did not have any significant discussions about the food deserts themselves until the 2010s. Hence, I believe the richness of this debate lies in that decade in particular and has become more prominent in the later years.

1.2. Historiography

Food deserts are not merely a novel topic within academia and politics alike. They were first categorized as a public health issue in the early 1990s and addressed as such from that time on as the subject unraveled under the pressure for a greener, more ethical consumption lifestyle.¹¹ Later, in 2008, the US government addressed the issue for the first time with the Food, Conservation, and

¹¹ ‘Preventing Chronic Disease: July 2009: 08_0163’, accessed 3 January 2024, https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2009/jul/08_0163.htm.

Energy Act Bill¹² which officially put food deserts on the federal radar. The USDA was charged with keeping track as well as classifying the areas that faced food insecurity along with other fourteen agricultural bills. From that year onwards, the US government provided funding for healthy food projects as well as promoted and financed businesses that could provide access to healthier food in food deserts. Yet, these governmental initiatives rarely recognized the nuances of the communities they targeted in the first place. In the 2010s, governmental initiatives such as SNAP (Nutrition Assistance Program) or the HFFI (Healthy Food Finance Initiative) did help to combat food insecurity in some areas of the food deserts, yet the problem persists.¹³¹⁴ Seeing that this issue is mostly treated as a “food insecurity” or a health crisis, the governmental solutions mostly tackle the consequences of living in such regions rather than its actual causes. The solutions thus, are mostly temporary and limited and mainly consist of health campaigns to promote healthy diets or the construction of grocery stores to close the “grocery gap”.

As the historiography below will showcase, the discourse in the food desert debate evolved throughout the decades, with more attention to locals and the peculiarities of their struggles. However, community efforts are often listed as a secondary thought to the more mainstream approach of critique towards the inefficient government policies and the underlying problem of racism and inequality. This thesis might be a gateway to recentering the food desert discourse around people as well as partially answering a more particular question of whether we as individuals have any power to cause permanent and positive change. Thus, in this paragraph, I will be following the debate around the concept of a food desert and the evolution of its language and theoretical frameworks, from the most mainstream notions to newer outlooks.

The “grocery gap” and the structural inequalities

Only recently the more traditional outlooks on the question of food deserts have been challenged. Mostly, the literature focuses on the same concepts of health, food access, and inequality, yet the discourse hardly ever evolves past health campaigns and demands for more supermarkets. As

¹² Collin C. [D-MN-7 Rep. Peterson, ‘H.R.2419 - 110th Congress (2007-2008): Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008’, legislation, 22 May 2008, 2007-05-22, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-bill/2419>.

¹³ ‘Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)’, Benefits.gov, accessed 23 June 2024, <https://www.benefits.gov/benefit/361>.

¹⁴ ‘Healthy Food Financing Initiative’, USDA. Rural Development, 1 October 2021, <https://www.rd.usda.gov/about-rd/initiatives/healthy-food-financing-initiative>.

aforementioned, Kolb talks about food deserts extensively in *Retail Inequality* (2022). His focus is on how the issue of food deserts is framed itself. Media and most scholars tend to blame this public health issue on proximity i.e. geographical difficulty of reaching a grocery store or a supermarket, as well as simplifying the issue by making it only about the availability of “healthy food”.¹⁵ His critique becomes evident when browsing through the majority of articles about food deserts. Much research has been conducted on the correlation between poor diet and the unavailability of grocery stores in food deserts, as it might be the easiest feature to identify when talking about food deserts.¹⁶ Obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases are being constantly researched, as parallels between poor nutrition and lack of availability of healthier food options have been drawn over and over again for over two decades. However, the connection is not as simple as it might seem at the beginning. Food desert residents might have different reasons as to why they chose a specific supermarket or opt to “outsource” their grocery shopping habits if the financial and time conditions allow it.¹⁷ While distance and lack of proper transportation, along with financial instability, are certainly major factors that need to be dealt with, the problems at the core of food deserts are structural inequality and racism in food distribution in the United States¹⁹. Along with government initiatives such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative²⁰ - which is making a difference by providing “grants, loans, and technical assistance to improve access to healthy food in underserved areas”, the food desert debate is still treated as simply an issue of investing carelessly money and putting more supermarkets in a said area, without properly diving deeper into the neighborhood’s stories of segregation and resilience.

Priya Fielding-Singh in her book *How the Other Half Eats. The Untold Story of Food and Inequality in America* (2021) takes a more intimate approach to the issue of food deserts, as she

¹⁵ Kolb, *Retail Inequality*, 122

¹⁶ Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar et al., ‘Distance to Store, Food Prices, and Obesity in Urban Food Deserts’, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 47, no. 5 (November 2014): 587–95, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2014.07.005>.

¹⁷ Johanna Key et al., ‘The Effects of Food Environment on Obesity in Children: A Systematic Review’, *Children* 10, no. 1 (3 January 2023): 98, <https://doi.org/10.3390/children10010098>.

¹⁸ Colin Campbell et al., ‘The Consequences of Living in a Small-Town Food Desert: Mixed Methods Evidence from a Quasi-Experiment’, *Social Currents* 7, no. 6 (1 December 2020): 563–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496520928428>.

¹⁹ Kolb, *Retail Inequality*, 188

²⁰ ‘America’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative | Reinvestment Fund’, America’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative, accessed 3 January 2024, <https://www.investinginfood.com/>.

monitors closely four families from different financial and racial backgrounds (and interviews several) and annotates their food habits. Since the author is a sociologist, her analysis is deeply personal as the families' actions have an impact strictly on themselves. Nevertheless, the core issues of structural racism and inequality seem to be the main problem when tacking the families' diets in the food desert. She mentions Michelle's Obama *Let's Move* campaign launched in 2010²¹ and how it mainly targeted the Black community, while in the meantime some healthy food products such as kale were (and still are) glorified by the white community, whereas soul food of the Black community is disregarded as fundamentally unhealthy.²²

Over the years, the food desert issue has been extensively discussed academically from different points of view. From a health issue hazard²³ (usually, a framework portrayed by widespread media outlets, although in recent years the news started to connect the issue of food accessibility to underlying inequality regarding food access) to an issue of inherent racism and urban inequality.²⁴ These low-income communities, often of color, lacked access to grocery stores and in some cases, these stores were substituted for liquor stores or fast-food chains. Larger and "healthier" food chains such as "Whole Foods" for instance, positioned themselves in richer neighborhoods where the local population had the means to purchase their products. Other larger chains, although not portrayed as healthy and sustainable as "Whole Foods", such as Walmart also moved their supermarkets towards bigger urban centers. As a result, many urban (black) neighborhoods were left with a grocery gap.²⁵

Food deserts and food insecurity are often framed as a "grocery gap" problem that links spatial and pricing inequalities as the main reasons why low-income communities lack access "to

²¹ 'Let's Move!', accessed 3 January 2024, <https://letsmove.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

²² Priya Fielding-Singh, *How the Other Half Eats. The Untold Story of Food and Inequality in America*, (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2021), 118 – 141

²³ D. Weatherspoon, Dave et al., 'Will Long Term Food Desert Consumers Purchase Fresh Fruits and Vegetables?', *Choices Magazine Online*, 3rd Quarter 2012, <https://www.choicesmagazine.org/choices-magazine/theme-articles/an-evaluation-of-food-deserts-in-america/will-long-term-food-desert-consumers-purchase-fresh-fruits-and-vegetables>.

²⁴ Grace DeLallo, 'Opinion | The United States Has a Food Accessibility, Not Obesity, Epidemic', *The Pitt News* (blog), 29 September 2021, <https://pittnews.com/article/167355/opinions/opinion-the-united-states-has-a-food-accessibility-not-obesity-epidemic/>.

²⁵ Andrew Deener, *The Problem with Feeding Cities: The Social Transformation of Infrastructure, Abundance, and Inequality in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 217 - 233

nutritious, affordable, and higher quality foods”.²⁶ However, this issue is often discussed in terms of health risks and is usually mentioned on medical and/or public health websites. Nevertheless, the issue of low access to grocery stores is still a relevant point in academia and a mainstream notion, since it is indeed the most visible feature of the food deserts. The “grocery gap” Deener analyses in his book *The Problem with Feeding Cities: The Social Transformation of Infrastructure, Abundance, and Inequality in America*, is seen as an inherent characteristic of food deserts. The disparities in the availability of healthier food options started to be popularized in the early 2000s, more than a decade later after food deserts were recognized as a public health issue. The disparities between white neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color regarding the amount of convenience as well as fast-food stores were acknowledged as part of “environmental barriers to a healthy lifestyle” well before the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) first mentioned food deserts in 2009.²⁷ Thus, the correlation between racial inequality and food accessibility in minority and mixed neighborhoods was established. Low-income neighborhoods have higher chances of being part of the food desert panorama; these neighborhoods often tend to be predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities or people of color. These studies also quite often confirm that the mere solution of placing a grocery store or a supermarket in the middle of a food desert town is often not enough to eradicate food deserts permanently.²⁸

Research shows that larger stores are prevalent in suburban areas, whereas convenience stores that usually display processed and lower-quality foods are more common in rural areas. Access to better quality supermarkets and grocery stores does not often result in the improvement of the community diet. As Singh’s research demonstrates, the majority of the families she has interviewed deliberately choose not to purchase healthy and fresh produce, even if it is geographically and financially available. The reasons for that vary from personal habits to having other financial priorities (gasoline, phone bills, etc.) or simply to the difficult balance between feeding the family and following the glorified trends of a healthy lifestyle. Nevertheless, the

²⁶ ‘Grocery Gap_June 2023.Pdf’, UTHHealth Houston, *School of Public Health*, accessed 25 January 2024, https://sph.uth.edu/research/centers/dell/legislative-initiatives/tx-rpc-project-reports/Grocery%20Gap_June%202023.pdf.

²⁷ Akiko S. Hosler, ‘Growing Disparities in an Urban Food Desert: Downtown Albany Longitudinal Food Environment Studies’, *Journal of Public Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1851>.

²⁸ Hunt Allcott et al., ‘Food Deserts and the Causes of Nutritional Inequality’, May 2019.

presence of a local and price-accessible grocery store does increase the neighborhood's chances of influencing food choices toward a healthier path.²⁹

The evolution of the food desert terminology

Consumer behavior became popularized in the 1980s, as it started to be addressed as a part of the environmental issues and consequently a scapegoat for failed environmental policies.³⁰ In the case of this thesis, communities living in food deserts or “food swaps” – a synonym or a correlate for “food desert” – are often seen as victims of mere health issues such as obesity and high blood pressure related to poor diet choices and lack of nutritious food.^{31,32} On many occasions, the fault falls upon the community itself in lacking the initiative and the persistence to commit to a healthier lifestyle. However, as Kolb and Singh were diving deep into the food desert communities themselves, they managed to show that the local struggles go further than the mere absence of a fancy supermarket in the neighborhoods. Moreover, the individuals themselves go to great lengths in finding a variety of solutions that would fit their lifestyles appropriately to reconcile their behavioral habits with the need and/or want of pursuit of a healthier way of living – equal to those living in wealthier and whiter areas of the United States.

The initiatives vary from educational campaigns to pop-up produce markets in food desert neighborhoods. The role of individual action will be expanded on further in the conceptual paragraph, as the core of this thesis is the nature and the consequences of local efforts. In many cases, community efforts are not at the center of literature pieces concerning food deserts. They are rather framed under the possible solutions, without considering the hindrances that a particular community might face or the superficiality of those guidelines or are a sub-category of bigger government initiatives. An interesting take on the food desert issue - and the most recent as it was founded in 2024 - the Food Empowerment Project (F.E.P.) aims at creating a sustainable

²⁹ Carolyn Dimitri and Stephanie Rogus, 'Food Choices, Food Security, and Food Policy', *Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 2 (2014): 19–31.

³⁰ 'The Litter Myth: Throughline', accessed 8 January 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757539617/the-litter-myth>.

³¹ “Food swaps” however refer specifically to the prevalence of fast-food restaurants rather than healthier restaurants, grocery stores and supermarkets in a certain area [food desert]

³² Melissa Goodman, Jessica Thomson, and Alicia Landry, 'Food Environment in the Lower Mississippi Delta: Food Deserts, Food Swamps and Hot Spots', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 10 (January 2020): 3354, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17103354>.

community project by also considering other factors such as racism, pricing issues, and the ability of people to adhere to those projects.³³ This project will not be necessarily part of this thesis as the timeline I will cover will stop at the year 2023, nevertheless, it is useful to consider the inner developments of the understanding of the food desert problem within the black community itself.

The lack of access to healthier food options is seen as not merely an issue of having a supermarket available nearby. It is considered a mistake in collecting and classifying data by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) as all the supermarkets – from Whole Foods Market to convenience stores that sell primarily poor-quality produce – are classified under the same category. Thus, in many cases, some neighborhoods lack government intervention as they do not fit under the category of “food deserts” and are believed to not need further interventions.

Hence, in recent years there has been a shift in terminology as food insecurity is more often referred to as “food apartheid”.³⁴ As the F.E.P. showcases, the food desert debate is being reframed by the communities themselves since the government-funded projects commonly overlook neighborhoods’ landscape and history. Local food justice activists deem that to be the core hindrance of why food deserts are still a topical matter despite having been a popularized issue for over twenty years. Individual actions seem to be a more practical and realistic solution as many communities rely on local organizations or single-handed small initiatives such as local pop-up markets³⁵ or rooftop gardens to fight against the unequal food distribution system. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial conditions of food deserts worsened even further forcing the local communities to rethink their circumstances.³⁶ Reconceptualizing the food desert problem from the inside gives local efforts a spotlight they rarely had before, yet these initiatives vary in their nature as well as their impact on the problem itself. Local community initiatives did not happen overnight, nor did they always tackle the issues of racism and inequality as they often do now. Their impacts are often left undocumented or are merely showcased as courageous and

³³ *Food Empowerment Project*, “Food Deserts”, accessed 25 January 2024, <https://foodispower.org/access-health/food-deserts/>.

³⁴ Katie Dillon, ‘Community-Driven Food Systems Are Key in Tackling Food Insecurity | HealthCity’, 6 December 2022, <https://healthcity.bmc.org/policy-and-industry/community-driven-food-systems-are-key-tackling-food-insecurity>.

³⁵ Sheffey, Ayelet and McAden, Margaret, ‘Fighting Food Apartheid’, Green America, accessed 25 January 2024, <https://greenamerica.org/your-green-life/fight-food-justice>.

³⁶ Sevilla, Nina, ‘Food Apartheid: Racialized Access to Healthy Affordable Food’, NRDC, 2 April 2021, <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/nina-sevilla/food-apartheid-racialized-access-healthy-affordable-food>.

admirable, rather than accounted for their actual repercussions on the food desert communities. With the developments in the terminology regarding food deserts, as well as the academic literature distancing itself from the health framework, the food desert debate starts to take a close interest in the heart of the issue and its more promising solution: its people. Whether the impact of local actions and individual resilience have actually improved the state of access to better food options and the behavioral attitude of the communities towards purchasing healthier produce is an understudied area of debate. The nuances of local efforts and whether they are indeed changing the panorama of food deserts are being more discussed in recent years as a greater number of writers and scholars – some of them mentioned in the paragraphs above – are taking a closer look as to why food insecurity issues are still persisting despite numerous federal fundings as well as a variety of different community efforts.

1.3. Conceptual framework

The underlying purpose of my thesis will be to observe what impact individual efforts have on the predominant invisible structure of food inequality and racial disparity in the United States. To understand the context in which those local actions took place as well as the possible hindrances they might have encountered, my thesis will be supported by mainly four concepts which will guide me in answering each of the sub-questions as mentioned earlier. These concepts will help me to contextualize the nature of local actions, i.e. how locals themselves perceive the issue of food deserts. Since structural racism and the peculiarities of food access within those areas are the most prominent frameworks of the recent debates regarding the food deserts, these are also reflected in the substance of the community efforts and thus are important to this research. However, this thesis might also use other concepts that will be explained consequently. The four main concepts are urban inequality, food (in)security and food sovereignty and lastly, the role of individual actions in environmental politics. I will use them to understand how the local communities frame the food desert issue, therefore what they think is the core of the problem and their consequent suggestion of solutions.

Urban inequality

The concept of urban inequality will be used mainly to understand how much of the segregation history is integrated into the local communities' discourse about the food deserts. It is a prominent feature of academic debate; however, discrimination policies are not always mentioned when talking about food deserts. It is important to understand that urban inequality did not occur recently but was a practice of most of the 20th century. Thus, racial disparity between white and black communities in the United States is not a new concept. Ronald H. Bayor tracks the creation of separate unequal neighborhoods, as urban development and financial disparities created distinct black areas as soon as the beginning of the 20th century. The segregation *per se* was achieved through tenant categories, rental properties, price ranges and building types which by default forced the Black community to find other housing. By the time World War II happened, the need for more housing for African Americans increased, however, the issue of racial violence posed itself crucial in the decision-making by local governors. As the new highways made their way to the larger cities, the majority of the Black population was moved there.³⁷

The theory about racial segregation then developed over the years, as the disconnection between social groups and social goods was looked at through a more geographical lens, rather than just as a mere inequality issue. As environmental awareness grew, this issue was usually tackled as something that affected all racial and class groups equally. However, it did not take long to realize that environmental hazards are affecting the working class, poor people and people of color more intensively and faster than those who are well-off or whiter.³⁸ Big cities such as Atlanta and Detroit went through a great urban transformation from 1970 to 1990 and as the city centers were developing, white people moved from the suburbs to the more supplied urban areas.³⁹ This trend would subvert to an extent in the 2000s, as some people were returning to the suburbs and lamenting the lack of better infrastructures, access to better goods and in this case, supermarkets or grocery stores.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ronald H. Bayor, 'Roads to Racial Segregation. Atlanta in the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Urban History* 15, no. 1 (November 1988): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009614428801500101>.

³⁸ Cheryl Holder: *The Link between Climate Change, Health and Poverty* | TED Talk, accessed 7 January 2024, https://www.ted.com/talks/cheryl_holder_the_link_between_climate_change_health_and_poverty.

³⁹ Liam Downey, 'Spatial Measurement, Geography, and Urban Racial Inequality', *University of Colorado at Boulder. Social Forces*, 81(3) (March 2003): 937 – 952

⁴⁰ Kolb, *Retail Inequality*

As neighborhoods changed throughout the twentieth century, white people moved as well as they left the suburban areas and found their way into the cities. In their publication, *Structural Racism, Structural Pollution and the Need for a New Paradigm* (2006) Cole, Luke W. and Coraline Farrell define this phenomenon as “white flight”⁴¹, referring to it as an issue of environmental pollution. However, not only the artificial black neighborhoods were the most hit by urban pollution, but they also lacked the basic infrastructures and resources that the white and richer neighborhoods often possessed.

Food insecurity/security

Food deserts are usually talked about in terms of food security or insecurity. As already mentioned in the previous sections of this thesis, the two terms are often used interchangeably to address low access to food. However, it is important to understand the difference between the two, as even if food deserts can and in most of cases do suffer from the issues of food insecurity, the two do not mean the same thing. The food deserts community often will refer to food desert solely by the terms of “food insecurity”, thus truly understanding its definition will help to comprehend the nature of some of the local initiatives and their impact.

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, more than 20 percent of Black/African American households and 16 percent were food insecure in 2021. Food insecurity means the lack of access to affordable nutritious foods which increases the risk of multiple chronic diseases.⁴² The matter of food insecurity in the US has been already extensively mentioned by multiple media sources as well as academic articles related to the development of chronic conditions or certain mental illnesses.⁴³ To achieve “food security”, as defined by the World Food Summit in 1996, would mean to ensure that “[...] all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary need and food preferences for

⁴¹ Luke W Cole and Caroline Farrell, ‘Structural Racism, Structural Pollution and the Need for a New Paradigm’, *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 20 (January 2006): 265–82.

⁴² ‘Food Accessibility, Insecurity and Health Outcomes’, NIMHD, accessed 8 January 2024, <https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/resources/understanding-health-disparities/food-accessibility-insecurity-and-health-outcomes.html>.

⁴³ Naseem S. Miller, ‘Food Insecurity in the US: An Explainer and Research Roundup’, *The Journalist’s Resource* (blog), 27 September 2022, <https://journalistsresource.org/home/food-insecurity-health/>.

an active and healthy lifestyle”.⁴⁴ Kohl and Singh mention food insecurity as well, although they make sure the reader knows the difference between food insecurity and food deserts as they may share the same root but are, at the core, different issues. Understanding the common mistake of using those two terms interchangeably (or the intentional use) will help detect the role of food insecurity in local communities’ discourse.

Food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is another widely popular term used by local organizations and activists alike while battling the food desert issue. As the terminology around food deserts is constantly evolving, food sovereignty is one concept strongly used by local activists to determine their strategy in their effort to eradicate food deserts. Food sovereignty as a concept was already developing between the 1980s and 1990s as it was first introduced as part of national and international agricultural policies. Consequently, since its primary goal was always that of transforming politics, economics, and social organizations surrounding food, food sovereignty became one of the most prominent models of food production, with a specific focus on rural development.⁴⁵ Food sovereignty was first introduced as we know it now by La Via Campesina (International Peasants’ Movement) via the World Food Summit in 1996 as “[...] the peoples’, Countries’ or State Unions’ RIGHT to define their agricultural and food policy, without any dumping vis-à-vis third countries.”⁴⁶ Among its goals are included: the prioritizing of local agricultural production, the right of farmers to produce food and that of the consumer to decide what and how to consume it, and the local populations’ right to take part in the agricultural policy choices. The main focus of food sovereignty movements is to strengthen the cultural and genetic heritage of the land and give back control to the local populations. That means guaranteeing equal access to resources such as land, water and means of production and control over the model of production, distribution, and consumption to the rural and urban areas of the world.⁴⁷ While the concept of food sovereignty

⁴⁴ ‘Chapter 2. Food Security: Concepts and Measurement [21]’, Food and Agriculture Organization, June 2006, <https://www.fao.org/3/y4671e/y4671e06.htm>.

⁴⁵ Hannah Wittman, Annette Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe, ‘The Origins & Potential of Food Sovereignty’, *Fernwood Publishing*, January 2010.

⁴⁶ ‘Food Sovereignty | Explained’, *La Via Campesina*, 15 January 2003, <https://viacampesina.org/en/food-sovereignty/>.

⁴⁷ Michel Pimbert, ‘Towards Food Sovereignty’ (International Institute for Environment and Development, 2009), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep01361>.

was mainly developed to reconstruct agricultural world systems as to preserve them from over-exploitation by neo-liberal international policies, its use has been widespread in the food desert matter. Both food security and food sovereignty discourses are interpreted as a solution to unequal food access and rural exploitation, however, it is important to understand that these can be applied to different contexts as well as to distinct food system dynamics. For instance, food security discourse while providing a relative analysis of unequal food access, does not necessarily delve into the racial and social inequities of means of production, resource control and access.⁴⁸

In the context of urban inequality as well as disparities in access to nutritious and healthier food, we need to place now the efficiency of local action against environmental injustice. However, we have to understand what role local actions hold themselves.

The role of individual actions

The debate about the role of individuals and their choices in environmental politics is fairly recent and has been especially vocal in the past decade. In this case, this thesis focuses primarily on the food desert community, thus the individuals are at the center of this research. Understanding the discourse surrounding the role of individual actions, the challenges they might face and their effectiveness, is crucial to comprehending the impact and feasibility of the actions carried out by the locals living in the food desert areas.

Elizabeth R. DeSombre delves into the nuances of individual behavior in environmental politics in her 2018 article *Individual Behaviour and Global Environmental Problems*. She admits that the most challenging aspect of environmental politics is persuading people to choose sustainability and green options as they are often more difficult to carry out in day-to-day life and most importantly, costly. To persuade people to choose healthier paths is a troublesome matter as environmental responsibility often conflicts with convenience and old habits or routines.⁴⁹ Singh's research already showcases how some families have access to healthier food, however, they still decide to choose easier and less nutritious options for several reasons that go from time issues to dealing with whimsical children. Kolb also argues that people in the food deserts are not helpless

⁴⁸ Lucy Jarosz, 'Comparing Food Security and Food Sovereignty Discourses', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 4, no. 2 (1 July 2014): 168–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820614537161>.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth R. DeSombre, 'Individual Behavior and Global Environmental Problems', *Global Environmental Politics* 18, no. 1 (February 2018): 5–12, https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00441.

victims, as the problem goes deeper than just placing a supermarket in the center of the neighborhood.

Individual actions often reflect the social norms and the dominant context in which these actions are carried out in the first place. According to Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman's 2010 article, several factors influence one's behavior and attitude towards environmental problems such as normative influences i.e. social norms and the flawed representation of one's individual beliefs ("I want to recycle") and carrying out the promise. Individuals who are more conscious about their responsibility will more like follow the "altruism-empathy-prosocial behavior" path which would more likely lead to pro-environmental behavior.⁵⁰ Individuals are not fully rational actors as often they lack complete information and are biased by their social and cognitive limitations in their decision-making process. In this case, sustainable information should be tailored according to communities' needs and capabilities.⁵¹ For instance, an expensive farmers market would make no sense in the case of food deserts since the majority of consumers would not be able to afford to purchase produce at that price. This would also explain why some of the government initiatives such as Michelle Obama's *Let Move!* campaign or persuading convenience stores to sell healthier food options failed.⁵² This is because the majority of lifestyle environmental changes are addressed using exclusively technical language or are limited in their knowledge of the local history and their needs. Thus, environmental solutions often lack "a sensitivity to the problems of everyday life, and second, that for most of the policy goals [...] the citizens are not able to establish the link with everyday life by themselves".⁵³ The abovementioned studies and similarities in individual behavior and actions in environmental politics should give enough context to properly analyze the nature of local (individual) actions against the structural injustices in food deserts.

⁵⁰ Anja Kollmuss and Julian Agyeman, 'Mind the Gap: Why Do People Act Environmentally and What Are the Barriers to pro-Environmental Behavior?', *Environmental Education Research* 8, no. 3 (August 2002): 239–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620220145401>.

⁵¹ Dara O'Rourke and Niklas Lollo, 'Transforming Consumption: From Decoupling to Behavior Change, to System Changes for Sustainable Consumption', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 40, no. 1 (2015): 233–59, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102014-021224.t>

⁵² National Research Council (US), 'Ameliorating Food Desert Conditions', in *The Public Health Effects of Food Deserts: Workshop Summary* (National Academies Press (US), 2009), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK208027/>.

⁵³ Gert Spaargaren, 'Sustainable Consumption: A Theoretical and Environmental Policy Perspective', *Society and Natural Resources*, 16 (2003): 687 – 701

1.4. Sources & Methodology

Over the years, the food desert debate got bigger and gained not only sensational media coverage but academic curiosity as well. As of recently, more accounts of an inherently unequal system as well as structurally limited access to healthier and more sustainable produce in poorer and diverse neighborhoods in the United States are being brought up as a core hindrance in finding an effective resolution to this topical issue. Local communities have a variety of solutions and their interpretation and course of action against the conditions of food deserts. These are expressed through different media by local activists, usually websites dedicated to their activities or specific platforms via which they advocate for their cause. Local communities have been also extensively covered by media and documentary episodes. This thesis will analyze these sources to better comprehend how the food desert communities express their concerns about the matter, what they do to battle their conditions and whether it is effective or not.

Source selection and criticism

Food deserts in the United States are documented through a variety of data. The majority of information about the current state of food deserts in the USA can be found on official government websites. Websites such as the United States Department of Agriculture⁵⁴ (USDA), along with the U.S. Census Bureau⁵⁵, provide extensive reports and up-to-date publications that shed light on the areas that are most subjected to food insecurity. These primary sources will be used in this thesis to frame the issue of food deserts as well as give a well-defined background to the racial inequality problem in the US. However, these quantitative data are not the main primary sources used in this thesis. However effective and reliable a database could be, quantitative research methods do not delve into the motifs behind the numbers; that is, they are less attuned to why people act and behave in certain ways.⁵⁶

The main primary sources of this thesis will be qualitative data such as interviews, speeches, lectures and other media accounts of local community actions in food deserts. For

⁵⁴ USDA. *Economic Research Service*, "Food Environment Atlas", accessed 11 May 2024, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/>.

⁵⁵ United States Census Bureau, "Home Page", last accessed November 19, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/>

⁵⁶ Melissa J. Goertzen, 'Chapter 3. Introduction to Quantitative Research and Data', *Library Technology Reports* 53, no. 4 (24 May 2017): 12–18.

instance, Internet Archive website⁵⁷ provides video footage of food desert conferences and TV reports throughout the years. Another example of primary sources used in this thesis are the TED talks given by Ron Finley⁵⁸ and Regina Bernard-Carreno⁵⁹ that tackle the issue of food deserts from their point of view, as they explore possible solutions along with the obstacles that prevent them from working appropriately. Documentaries such as “Living in a Food Desert”⁶⁰ and PBS episodes⁶¹ regarding the same issue are also primary sources that not only explain the issue of food insecurity but also showcase community perspectives and their efforts in fighting against their condition in food deserts. In this case, these documentaries and episodes will be useful because they document the local community churches’ actions or other miscellaneous activities by locals that are otherwise not thoroughly recorded.

Since the time frame of my research covers the years from 2010 to 2023, I believe the best way to follow up with the local efforts of populations in food desert areas is through modern media materials such as the ones aforementioned. My decision to prioritize these materials over other media sources such as newspaper articles is linked to the focal point of my thesis itself, as I intend to focus on locals and individuals – specifically how they perceive their efforts and the impact of their actions – and not the external media perception of the food desert communities. Thus, I will mainly analyze sources that allow me direct access to the perspectives of local people. Yet, some newspaper articles will be mentioned throughout this thesis, as they report on how local communities’ actions work in practice.

A limitation of the primary sources can be that some of them may be perceived as biased. For instance, the documentaries are filmed through the point of view of the filmmaker which can impact the overall context of the community actions. However, the documentaries selected can be considered “fly-on-the-wall” documentaries, that are primarily aimed at gathering information about local perspectives and actions in food deserts. Still, in making use of these sources, the

⁵⁷ ‘Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free & Borrowable Books, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine’, accessed 22 January 2024, <https://archive.org/>.

⁵⁸ Ron Finley, ‘A Guerrilla Gardener in South Central LA’, filmed February 2013 at TED Talk video, https://www.ted.com/talks/ron_finley_a_guerrilla_gardener_in_south_central_la/transcript.

⁵⁹ Regina Bernard-Carreno, ‘The Underlying Racism of America’s Food System’, filmed March 2014 at TEDxManhattan, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0XG-ETx5fk>.

⁶⁰ *Living In a Food Desert Documentary*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jicYbi-8ZNU>.

⁶¹ *Intersections | Food Deserts | Season 3 | Episode 5*, PBS, accessed 22 January 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/video/food-deserts-luboex/>.

perspective provided will be assessed critically. This includes TED talks, which tend to be given by a speaker with a specific background, for instance in academia or activism.

Another limitation of my primary sources is the length of the thesis and the time limits. Since it is a gargantuan task to analyze every single piece of modern media regarding food deserts, limiting the research to the years 2010 to 2023 will assist me in selecting the necessary number of primary sources to answer my research question. It does not mean that there were not any local community initiatives against food deserts before 2010; however, there was a spike in local actions in the 2010s which makes this time period the most abundant to analyze. Nevertheless, some of the community activities prior to 2010 will be mentioned throughout the thesis to put the local community actions within a context. Moreover, I will select the sources that I deem to be most effective for the purposes of the chapters. Some of them will be the sources that focus more on the language/strategies used by the local actors, others solely on their actions. The majority however does present both of the elements needed for the analysis, nonetheless, some of them have a stronger emphasis on the message they intend to advocate for, and others are dedicated to the sole purpose of promoting their initiatives. Geographically speaking, since food deserts do not interest just a singular region of the United States, the sources will cover a variety of different states and areas of the country. These include the states of California, Texas, New York, and others, to name a few.

Methodology

Qualitative research analysis ultimately means “making sense” of the gathered data and applying the necessary skills and knowledge to the primary sources that will answer the research question.⁶² To carry out my research I will be using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method is mainly used to compare, analyze and produce critical research, by “incorporating social-theoretical insights into discourse analysis”.⁶³ It became one of the most prominent methods of discourse analysis since it deals with inequality and power relations within the study of language.⁶⁴ CDA proves to be the best method when dealing with the type of research conducted in this thesis since

⁶² Sharon L. Caudle, “Qualitative Data Analysis”, in *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, ed. Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry and Kathryn E. Newcomer, (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 417 - 437

⁶³ Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen, ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 447–66.

⁶⁴ Caudle, “Qualitative Data Analysis”

the primary sources need to be analyzed through a lens of racial and structural inequality. Critical reading of interviews, TV reports, documentaries and other media is thus essential in answering my research question.

The close reading technique will also be useful when analyzing the selected primary sources, despite it being used mostly in literature studies.⁶⁵ It will be used to enhance the CDA analysis, as it tends to focus on some specific words and their meaning given a specific context. I will analyze the selected primary sources and identify the words more frequently used to address the food deserts. Terms such as “food sovereignty”, “inequality” “food security”, and “health” – for instance – will be the focal point of this thesis and will help me in the task of framing the impact of local actions. These words – or the absence of some or their close synonyms – are going to give me a better understanding of how the community itself is framing its issue. Then, I will link the presence or the absence of these words to the concepts explained in the previous section, in order to understand the exact stance community members are taking in their battle against food deserts. Are their actions directed against the inherent racism system? If so, they are more prone to use stronger and more racially charged language and their actions will have the ultimate goal to dismantle the unequal urban layout. Are they only addressing unequal food access? If so, their language is going to be more focused on issues of food access and their actions on food distribution initiatives. Is there any awareness of their struggle as individuals against a bigger and stronger unequal system with structural limitations? If so, there will be an emphasis on the historical discrimination of the Black and Indigenous communities, and their agendas are going to have a more ambitious scope.

1.5. Thesis structure

Each analytical chapter of this thesis aims to answer the three sub-questions mentioned in the previous section. Chapter 2 will analyze the language of the local communities, focusing on the most prominent actors and those who can give a significant contribution – data-wise – to this research. Thus, it will analyze how the communities voice their concerns about the lack of food access. Chapter 3 is going to detect the most popular initiatives carried out by the community.

⁶⁵ Mark Byron, ‘Close Reading’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1014>.

Chapter 4 is going to analyze the impact of the language and the actions that local communities have on food deserts in general. It will analyze who is the recipient of the most popular initiatives, i.e. who actually benefits from these actions; it will also explore the tensions among different ways of framing the issue and the ambitiousness of some of the most historically charged initiatives; it will also explore the challenges and the achievements of the community.

CHAPTER 2. HOW DO LOCAL COMMUNITIES EXPRESS THEIR CONCERNS

To begin to understand the impact of local communities in food deserts we need to start by analyzing and taking a closer look into exactly how these communities express their concerns in the first place. Each actor who decides to act against the food desert issue has their own motivation and language to advocate for their cause. Seemingly, the local communities have similar intentions and live through the same struggles that pushed them to act in the first place. However, food deserts are a multilayered issue. This complexity is reflected in the local communities as well. In this chapter, I will analyze the most prominent local advocates, including local churches, activists, and small and big organizations.

2.1. Talking about food insecurity

In this paragraph, the primary source will be testimony of local churches who fight or take a close interest in the fight against food deserts. Before going into the specifics of local church-based community actions - such as the one above and similar – it is essential to understand in what way a church community is important in solving issues such as food deserts in the United States. A 2011 study from Barna Group shows that although there is a significant amount of public skepticism of religion, fifty-three percent of Americans still deem churches a very important part of their community.⁶⁶ Approximately half of these people consider charitable work to be the best way a local church can contribute to their community. As a matter of fact, faith and spiritual guidance are becoming undermined elements of American churches, since even the unchurched adults understand the importance “of the service and assistance that churches can provide to their communities”.⁶⁷ Churches in this sense, can serve as an institution that unites groups of people and has the interests of the community at the core. Incidentally, the major issues are poverty and health. Thus, they often act as community caretakers as they find ways to help through soup kitchens, town meetings, and overall community guidance.⁶⁸ Such is the case of food deserts as well, as they

⁶⁶ ‘Do Churches Contribute to Their Communities?’, Barna Group, 13 July 2011, <https://www.barna.com/research/do-churches-contribute-to-their-communities/>.

⁶⁷ Barna Group, “Do Churches Contribute to Their Communities?”

⁶⁸ Joseph Honescko, ‘The Local Church Can Meet the Hidden Needs of a Community | Common Good Magazine’, 25 March 2022, <https://commongoodmag.com/the-local-church-can-meet-the-hidden-needs-of-a-community/>.

often rely on church meetings and church food initiatives to sustain and help those who struggle the most.

The relevance of the community churches is evident also in the research conducted by Kenneth Kolb, as throughout his book he mentions the local church of Greenville several times.⁶⁹ Although his research takes approximately ten years of reviewing media news articles, interviewing local people and activists – as well as tracking down the changes in the food desert communities – this church meeting is something that pops up quite often in his book. The Mountain View Baptist Church is located in Greenville, South Carolina, and has been a crucial part of the local Black community since its foundation in 1908. Kohl attended a neighborhood meeting in October 2014. As the community discussed its imminent problems with food accessibility and lack of healthier options, the main concern seemed to be primarily the absence of a grocery store or a supermarket - “What we need is a grocery store!” – or concerns about unequal treatment of their neighborhood: “When is *our* side of the city going to be revitalized?”⁷⁰

The two main concerns seem to revolve around a “grocery gap” in the Greenwood neighborhood, as well as the allusion to its racial urban disparity in comparison to other neighborhoods.⁷¹ The residents, as well as the church itself, appear to be aware of a structural inequality that left urban and rural areas of the United States underdeveloped, lacking basic infrastructures and unequally treated in terms of governmental funds since the beginning of the 20th century.⁷² The practice of “redlining” – that took place in the 1930s by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) – gave a grade to residential neighborhoods in major US cities to assess the amount potential investors could give. The grading system went from “A” (green) to “D” (red) – “best” to “hazardous” neighborhoods. The practice led to “financial disinvestment” and “resource deficiencies” in Black and mixed communities as redlining was an inherently racist and xenophobe procedure. The lower grades were usually given to urban and rural neighborhoods

⁶⁹ Kenneth H. Kolb, *Retail Inequality. Reframing The Food Desert Debate* (Oakland: University California Press, 2022)

⁷⁰ Kenneth H. Kolb, *Retail Inequality*, 1 - 6

⁷¹ The resident of Greenville who underlines the issue of inequity of food accessibility then later informs Kenneth Kolb that she used to have better and more affordable food options when lived in New York

⁷² Bayor, ‘Roads to Racial Segregation. Atlanta in the Twentieth Century’.

causing housing discrimination, poverty, racial segregation, and violence, long-lasting consequences still haunting those neighborhoods to this day.⁷³⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the racial aspect of the food desert issue seems to be overlooked as part of the church attendees still believe that the mere presence of a grocery store or a supermarket in the area would solve or at least improve their food choices. It is not an issue that interests exclusively the church communities *per se*, however, the persistent use of this framework concerns mainly local churches. Yet, it has been already proven that simply filling the grocery gap without addressing the structural problems of racism and inequality is not the solution to the food desert problem.⁷⁵ The health aspect of the food deserts is also something these particular communities often refer to, alongside tackling the issues that come with food insecurity. These two concepts then are used to refer to the problem of food deserts, as churches battle its conditions often by feeding those who are in need with healthier and local produce. The examples below will showcase how these two frameworks (health and food insecurity) are predominant in the local community church circles.

The case of the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago is another exemplary case of failed interventions and a lack of better understanding of the food desert issue. As already told in the introductory chapter, the Canaan Community Church in Chicago, Detroit was mostly responsible for the emergence of Whole Foods in an otherwise violent and poor neighborhood in 2016. However, already in 2022, the grocery store was forced to close due to its high prices as the sales were not nearly enough to keep the store afloat.⁷⁶ It does have a Facebook page –The Canaan Community Church’s Facebook page has a variety of posts, however, the only ones that are somewhat reminiscent of the food desert problem predominantly tackle issues of health and food awareness. Thus, the grocery gap mentality seems to be less important than the dietary rhetoric, combined with a healthier food distribution system that might involve church orchards or gardens. One of the most recent posts goes back to the 25th of June 2023 and refers to a class on nutrition

⁷³ Redlining was prohibited in 1968

⁷⁴ Yasamin Shaker et al., ‘Redlining, Racism and Food Access in US Urban Cores’, *Agriculture and Human Values* 40, no. 1 (2023): 101–12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10340-3>.

⁷⁵ Allcott et al., ‘Food Deserts and the Causes of Nutritional Inequality’.

⁷⁶ Aimee Levitt and Waxman, Naomi, ‘Whole Foods Is Leaving Englewood: Now What?’, *Eater Chicago*, 2 May 2022, <https://chicago.eater.com/2022/5/2/23053317/whole-foods-englewood-grocery-ravenswood-restaurant-delivery-bombobar-marz-malort-spritz>.

“[...] where (we) ask the question “Can nutritious be delicious?””.⁷⁷ A need for [healthier] food options seems to be expressed in terms of nutrition and health perspective. It follows the mainstream approach to the food desert issue, as focusing on nutrition will recenter the food desert discourse around the lack of dietary notions and health-related issues such as obesity and diabetes. Another post referring to food and nutrition dates back to August 2019 when the Englewood church hosted a summer garden project and educated the youth about food herbs, vegetables, and other produce.⁷⁸ This project was a collaboration in partnership with Sunshine Gospel Ministries, which is a Christian Community Development Centre based in Chicago that comprises multiple ministries with the mission “[...] to seek the renewal of the city through ministries of discipleship, mercy and justice.”⁷⁹ Thus, The Canaan Community Church is an illustrative case of how usually the church communities approach the food deserts issue and of the role they hold within food desert communities as a whole.

Moreover, local churches’ endeavors are often featured in the news and documentaries about food deserts. For instance, a 2022 PBS episode on food deserts features Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Duluth, Minnesota. In this episode, they showcase how the church is responsible for delivering groceries to the poorest of the community as one of the inhabitants that often resort to this service comments that “[...] it makes a difference in what I can have to eat.”⁸⁰ The food assistance is free of charge and usually consists of vegetables and fruits, besides other miscellaneous things. It seems, however, that Our Savior’s Lutheran Church tackles more an issue of “food insecurity” rather than the food desert problem itself, focusing more on the healthier side of food distribution. As a matter of fact, the PBS episode mostly focuses on the health aspect of having a varied and balanced diet, as well as environmental sustainability. Another mention of churches in the matter of food deserts is featured in a local news piece of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.⁸¹ The news reporter states the following: “The pastor of this church says there are not a lot of healthy food options for the community”, implying that Mecklenburg County is a food desert area. The church indeed cooperates with local food organizations to pursue the goal of “[...]”

⁷⁷ ‘Canaan Community Church’, Facebook, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064791243418/search?q=food>.

⁷⁸ “Canaan Community Church”, Facebook

⁷⁹ ‘Sunshine Gospel Ministries’, Sunshine Gospel, accessed 12 March 2024, <https://www.sunshinegospel.org>.

⁸⁰ *Intersections | Food Deserts | Season 3 | Episode 5*, PBS, accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/video/food-deserts-luboex/>.

⁸¹ *FOOD DESERTS*, 2020, http://archive.org/details/FOOD_DESERTS.

giving food to people and we can do better with what we're giving." Alongside delivering fresh produce, the church also established some edible orchards, however, the main theme of the initiatives seems to be that of battling food insecurity and health-related issues rather than eradicating food deserts for good. These two narratives are often intertwined, as the food distribution initiatives that mostly tackle food insecurity problems in those areas, are transformed into matters of food deserts with a health-related approach added to the issue.

2.2. Shift in terminology: towards food justice and food apartheid

The discourse around food deserts may appear straightforward at first, however, this topic is more complex than it seems initially. For instance, we have already seen how the same issue can be addressed differently, specifically in terms of language and different frameworks. In the historiography of this thesis and the first paragraph of this chapter, food deserts can be considered a problem of food insecurity, health and unbalanced diet or lack of supermarkets. This paragraph further explores the evolution in food desert terminology by focusing on food desert or climate activists, teachers and university professors who discuss the more profound aspects of this issue. TED talks platform will be the primary source of this section since its very purpose is to spread information and education by allowing experts to advocate for their causes.⁸² In this case, several activists and professors expressed their opinions and concerns on the said platform and thus, gave an insight into the changes within the more vocal activist community.

Food deserts are not explicitly discussed on the internet or among local communities before the 2010s. As a matter of fact, most of the time this issue was incorporated among a list of other environmental concerns such as pollution and urban degradation, which intrinsically interest food desert areas as well. Thus, the term "food desert" would be concealed as a health issue due to the lack of availability of more nourishing food options. However, the food deserts were still (explicitly) debated during community and/or neighborhood meetings. For instance, during the Neighborhood Summit 2012 in Cincinnati⁸³, food deserts are vastly discussed from the standpoint of bringing attention to the topic as well as possible solutions to the problem. However, these

⁸² Maxime Masson, 'Benefits of TED Talks', *Canadian Family Physician* | *National Library of Medicine* 60, no. 12 (December 2014): 1080.

⁸³ *NS12: Food Deserts*, 2012, http://archive.org/details/NS12_-_Food_Deserts.

meetings often did not challenge the language surrounding food deserts or their deeper roots, as these summits mostly served as a means of coming up with effective solutions and allowing the community to express their concerns on the topic. People who were more actively involved in the food desert issue and its terminology did change the way they addressed the problem, from an environmental concern to health to a food apartheid issue.

The earliest mention of food deserts among environmental activists dates back to 2006 and tackles mostly matters of pollution and environmental inequality in an underprivileged neighborhood of South Bronx, New York City, New York. Majora Carter, an environmental activist, gives a passionate talk about her upbringing in an area that suffered from redlining policies in the 20th century along with racial urban inequality that left neighborhoods alike racially segregated and underdeveloped. “Ghettos”, like the South Bronx one, are often exposed to pollution due to the presence of waste plants, sewage treatment plants, and power plants. Carter often mentions problems of “race and class” when referring to the environmental issues of her neighborhood (which are mostly related to pollution), while also mentioning health issues such as “[...] obesity, diabetes and asthma”. While the latter can be attributed to air pollution caused by waste plants, the former two are implicitly connected to poor diet and unavailability of healthy food options.⁸⁴ South Bronx or Bronx appears to meet the criteria to be identified as a small food desert.⁸⁵ As a matter of fact, high obesity rates are mentioned once again throughout the talk as a health issue that haunts most of the United States. Her project “Green the Ghetto” is a more encompassing project that aims to redesign the entire neighborhood to ecologically improve it and bring urban inequality to an end, as it talks about “green-collar jobs” as well as building green rooftops to improve air quality for instance, as well as allow the plantation of vegetables. It is later specified that she also advocated for building a large fresh food facility in the South Bronx, which suggests an implicit fight with unequal food access and unavailability of certain produce.⁸⁶ Thus, in this case, the issue is part of a bigger environmental movement, however, it is framed as one of

⁸⁴ Majora Carter, “Greening the Ghetto,” filmed February 2006 at TED, video, 18:17, https://www.ted.com/talks/majora_carter_greening_the_ghetto.

⁸⁵ ‘USDA ERS - Go to the Atlas’, accessed 13 March 2024, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>.

⁸⁶ Tom Prigg, ‘Urban Activist Majora Carter Promotes “Greening the Ghetto”’, The Allegheny Front, 19 April 2013, <https://archive.alleghenyfront.org/story/urban-activist-majora-carter-promotes-greening-ghetto.html>.

the many consequences of racial urban inequality from the 1970s to the 1990s.⁸⁷ Later, food deserts are no longer framed as an environmental issue but are talked about as a “health problem” of the underprivileged communities.

Already in 2012, South Bronx’s environmental issues are being framed from a quality and/or unavailability of food point of view. Stephen Ritz, a local teacher, gives a talk alongside a PowerPoint showcasing himself as well as some of his students’ planting seeds and quite literally, holding onto different types of greens.⁸⁸ Similarly to Majora Carter, Ritz also believes his neighborhood is exceptionally underdeveloped and suffers from issues of poverty and violence. The term “food desert” is never mentioned throughout the talk as the teacher talks about green edible walls made of freshly planted vegetables such as collard greens and tomatoes. As a matter of fact, the words “health” and “weight” are mentioned alongside words such as “food” and “environment” (later more specifically, “food justice”), following yet again the trend of implicitly talking about food access through the lens of bigger environmental issues. However, Stephen Ritz does put more emphasis on weight loss and healthier diets, following the trend of framing food deserts as matters from a health and educational point of view. Unlike Carter, Ritz appears to stress the importance of individual action as well as the power of possessing the right information.

The responsibility of growing your food and focusing on a healthy lifestyle is an aspect of the food desert issue explored by Ron Finley too, in his TED talk in 2013.⁸⁹ Ron Finley is an urban gardener and activist from South Los Angeles, California, a food desert. In his speech he talks about the unjust system of his neighborhood as he simply yet effectively puts it as “food is the problem and food is the solution”. What is important is the multitude of perspectives the food desert issue can be discussed from, as some speakers choose to focus on the individual responsibility aspect of the food desert issue alongside the health aspect of it. Ron also focuses mostly on health-related issues of living in a food desert and the lack of access to nutritious food alternatives as well as to grocery stores in general. Thus, he mostly frames the food desert problem from a health perspective.

⁸⁷ Liam Downey, “Spatial Measurement, Geography, and Urban Racial Inequality,” *Social Forces* 81, no. 3 (March 1, 2003): 937–52, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2003.0031>.

⁸⁸ Stephen Ritz, “A Teacher Growing Green in the South Bronx,” filmed February 2012 at TEDxManhattan, New York, video, 13:26, https://www.ted.com/talks/stephen_ritz_a_teacher_growing_green_in_the_south_bronx.

⁸⁹ Ron Finley, “A Guerrilla Gardener in South Central LA,” filmed in February 2013 at TED Talk, video https://www.ted.com/talks/ron_finley_a_guerrilla_gardener_in_south_central_la/transcript.

During these years and further on, however, the historical side of the food desert issue started to be more acknowledged. Lecturers distance themselves from the term “food desert” as they actively try to shift the terminology to reflect the actual core of the issues: inherent racist politics. Already around 2014, lecturers started to address the food desert issue using alternative terms to underline the inequality aspects of the topic. Indeed, the racial roots of the food desert issue are remarkably explored by Regina Berdard-Carreno, in her 2014 TED talk, as she was one of the first activists to highlight the issue in terminology.⁹⁰ I will take her lecture as a diving board to introduce the shift in terminology among experts on food deserts as well as her exemplary emphasis on urban inequality and the connection to this matter. She introduces the neighborhood she grew up in, Hell’s Kitchen, New York, as she illustrates its poor food options while adding that they mostly ate homemade meals. However, due to the gentrification process, they were forced to move to Queens where she found herself asking “[...] what is that I don’t eat?”. Carreno also never mentions food deserts explicitly, yet she indirectly refers to the lack of healthy and/or safe food alternatives in her area: “[...] a shady supermarket, [...] cow’s tongue wrapped in plastic, [...] I’d have to get my food through a bulletproof glass window [...]”. Furthermore, she does not use the term “food desert”, as she resorts to more specific terminology such as “food apartheid” and “food disparity” which manage to encapsulate the racial inequality approach to this issue. Similarly to Ritz, Carreno recruited her undergraduate students to help her out with her research about food options in their neighborhood. Along with her students, she took part in a local gardening initiative, however, she found out soon that people behind such projects are often white and more privileged than the locals they are seeking to help, thus not knowledgeable about the more intimate dynamics and history of the neighborhood. Carreno wraps up her lecture by emphasizing the importance of terminology used to fight against food deserts and the value of information given to the right people – and not “outsiders” who are often unaware of the social and historical dynamics behind food inequality.

The thread of the ever-changing terminology surrounding food deserts continued throughout the decade. As recently as in 2023 there were still lectures about the vocabulary used to talk about the topic and the issues surrounding it. The issue has not been vastly explored *per se*, as there are but a couple of TED talks that focus on the terminology rather than on solutions

⁹⁰ Regina Bernard-Carreno, “The Underlying Racism of America’s Food System,” filmed March 12, 2014 at TEDxManhattan, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0XG-ETx5fk>.

regarding food deserts. However, these introduced new terms that incorporated the historical racial inequalities mentioned above, experienced mostly by the Black communities. Updated vocabulary refers to unfair treatment that food desert communities experienced long before being qualified as “food desert areas”. It tends to highlight the difference in accessibility, infrastructures and overall quality of life that Black and Indigenous communities have been facing throughout the 20th century. For instance, the term “food justice” is relatively unused and has to be handled carefully, as while strictly relating to the food desert issue it means the lack of equality in food options and/or food access, in more political terms, it could suggest the exploitation of Black/Latino and immigrant communities that work on farm and/or factories. In her 2013 TED talk, LaDonna Redmond - founder and CEO of The Campaign for Food Justice Now – criticizes the term “food desert” as too reductive, while sarcastically underlining that “building a new Walmart” in her neighborhood will not solve the issues of hunger and economic inequality.⁹¹ She advocates that “food justice” is more comprehensive of the core issues of the food deserts that are more of a racial and injustice matter than that of health or diet. As previously explained in the historiography section of this thesis – as well as by the example here above – the food desert terminology is slowly shifting away from the mere notion of health or a “grocery gap” issue; it acknowledges the deeper social and economic root of the problem. Already mentioned in the Shaker article about redlining procedures back in the 1930s⁹², the term “food desert” gives the appearance that food deserts are a natural phenomenon, similar to deserts in nature. However, as Dr. Latame Phillips states in his TED talk as recently as October 2023, food deserts are a human-made issue, rooted in decades of racial segregation and inequality, financial deficiency, and finally, gentrification. He states that “[...] it’s not a food desert; it’s food apartheid”.⁹³ Food apartheid appears to be the strongest term used among environmental activists and academia, as it mirrors the racial apartheid the Black community was subjected to up to the second half of the 20th century. Due to segregation, black people were forced to use different services and facilities than white people, which resulted in the former being forcibly moved into “ghettos”. These areas, as mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, had inherently a lower number of services, lacked proper infrastructures, and often had

⁹¹ LaDonna Redmont, “Food + Justice = Democracy,” filmed March 5, 2013 at TEDxManhattan, New York, video, 12:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydZfSuz-Hu8>.

⁹² Shaker et al., ‘Redlining, Racism and Food Access in US Urban Cores’.

⁹³ Dr. Latame Phillips, “Food Deserts and Unicorns Are the Same Thing,” filmed on October 24, 2023 at TEDxBotham Jean Blvd, video, 9:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjXh-NCzmaY>.

waste and power plants.⁹⁴ The lack of supermarkets and access to healthy and affordable food options are consequences of decades of racial apartheid in the USA, which to this day has not been fixed nor addressed properly. Thus, addressing food deserts as areas of “food apartheid” seems appropriate since it encapsulates decades of historical discrimination against Afro-American and Indigenous communities.

2.3. Talking about food sovereignty

There is a great variety of organizations dedicated to the fight against food deserts in the United States. Following the trends in the evolution of terminology, a part of these organizations does not explicitly refer to the food desert as “food deserts” *per se* but uses more encapsulating terms such as “food justice” and “food sovereignty”, to mention a few. These initiatives play a huge role in the struggle against unequal food access and lack of healthy food alternatives, as they are mostly volunteer-based, directed at local communities – mostly at younger people – and are the epitome of community perseverance and efforts. Since the majority of organizations’ websites also contain information about the concrete measures they promote, this part of the chapter will only focus on those that use strong and clear language to define their cause.

One of the first significant organizations to fight against the food desert struggles in the early 2000s is the Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network⁹⁵ (DBCFSN). Founded in 2006, it has the goal of making sure that the African American population is part of the food justice movement. They never mention food deserts explicitly – as it will be the case of many other organizations mentioned in this section – however, they tackle all the other aspects of the food system justice movement. Environmental and food justice appear to be the priorities of the organization, yet the word “health” is also mentioned when referring to the reeducation of the community towards a healthier diet. All of the initiatives respect the community’s history and needs and address its struggles as a historically, economically, and racially segregated area.

⁹⁴ James A. Kushner, ‘Apartheid in America: An Historical and Legal Analysis of Contemporary Racial Residential Segregation in the United States’, *Howard Law Journal* 22, no. 4 (1979): 547–686.

⁹⁵ DBCFSN, ‘Home: Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network’, DBCFSN, accessed 17 March 2024, <https://www.dbcfsn.org>.

The Ron Finley Project⁹⁶, founded in 2010 by Ron Finley – aforementioned in the TED talks section of this chapter – is another project focused specifically on one area, in this case, Los Angeles, California. Finley’s project focuses on education, healthy nutrition, and the power of the community values being transformed and shared: “[...] teaching communities how to transform food deserts into food sanctuaries, and teaching individuals how to regenerate their lands into creative business models.” Since a healthy lifestyle can be costly (time and money-wise) Finley also encourages the community to profit from selling vegetables and dropping off grocery bags. Unlike the DBCFSN, this website is very “hip”⁹⁷ and plays to its strength of promoting a sustainable lifestyle as fun and engaging. Nevertheless, his website does mention that the overwhelming majority of people living in food deserts in the U.S.A. are African American and Latin American populations, alluding to the underlying structural problems of racism and inequality. However, the major focus appears to be on health and health issues caused by poor-quality food options i.e. obesity and diabetes.

Soul Fire Farm⁹⁸ is another example of an organization that focuses more on the health aspect of food deserts, although without mentioning its historical roots. Founded in 2011, Soul Fire Farm officially started as a project to deliver fresh produce to low-income community members in 2010. Now, its goals are to fight against the unjust food system and advocate for people living under food apartheid. In addition to promoting justice and equal opportunities for Black and Brown communities, they also point out the negative effects of limited access to a healthy variety of food such as “[...] diabetes, heart disease, and other diet-related illness”. Their concerns are encapsulated in a larger environmental cause aimed at building and growing a sustainable and affordable economic food system for unprivileged communities. To achieve this, they strive to erase a capitalistic view of nature and apply a “[...] African-Indigenous wisdom and technologies [as] part of the solution to feeding the world without undermining its ecology”. Harlem Grown⁹⁹, founded in 2011 in Harlem, has similarly the same mission as Soul Fire Farm since it primarily advocates for a sustainable and healthy lifestyle. Yet, there is no mention of a historical struggle as a consequence of why some areas of the United States specifically suffer from health issues

⁹⁶ *Ron Finley Project*, "Ron Finley Project", accessed March 16, 2024, <https://ronfinley.com/pages/about>.

⁹⁷ The whole purpose of Ron Finley Project is to attract a younger audience as his motto is “Gardening is gangsta”

⁹⁸ *SOUL FIRE FARM*, "Strategic Goals," December 6, 2017, <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/about/goals/>.

⁹⁹ *Harlem Grown*, 'About: Harlem Grown', Harlem Grown, accessed 17 March 2024, <https://www.harlemgrown.org/about>.

related to food and poor diet habits. Nevertheless, the website does mention the term “food justice” when addressing their educational agenda.

The organizations listed from this point onwards also mention the health benefits of a balanced and varied diet, however, their major focus is racial inequality and food justice. Black Farmers & Urban Gardeners¹⁰⁰ (BUGs), founded in 2010, is the largest conference formed to bring together Black agrarian leadership and help reclaim control over their lifestyle through “food sovereignty and justice”. This is achieved by organizing annual national conferences promoting and advocating for Black agriculture. Already by defining that this endeavor is specifically about Black agriculture and not white for instance, it fully highlights the stance this organization is taking regarding food deserts - that they are products of racist urban policies and an inherent unequal food system that benefits a certain type of neighborhoods. Their goal is very explicit: “... [create] more equitable and sustainable food systems”. This seems to be a goal of the majority of organizations that are fighting against food deserts, even if the term “food desert” is never explicitly mentioned and is substituted and/or enriched with updated terminology such as “food apartheid”, “food justice” and ultimately, “food sovereignty”.

Food sovereignty is a term that often pops up when these organizations talk about food deserts, without really ever mentioning the term. The concept *per se* is usually applied to larger agricultural systems¹⁰¹, however, the core message of giving back control over land, resources and means of production to local populations makes sense in the food desert discourse as well. The organization mentioned in this section of the chapter often advocates not only for access to healthy and nutritious food – a definition more appropriate to “food security”¹⁰² – but also for the exploited and underprivileged rural populations, specifically farmers, that do not have a say in environmental and agrarian policies of their neighborhoods.

Such is also the case of CoFED (Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive)¹⁰³, founded in 2011. This organization partners primarily with young people “[...] of color from poor and working-class backgrounds to meet our communities’ needs”. Their goal is to create a new food

¹⁰⁰ ‘Home: Black Urban Growers’, Black Urban Grower, accessed 16 March 2024, <https://www.blackurbangrowers.org/about>.

¹⁰¹ Pimbert, ‘Towards Food Sovereignty’.

¹⁰² “Chapter 2. Food Security: Concepts and Measurement [21],” Food and Agriculture Organization, June 2006, <https://www.fao.org/3/y4671e/y4671e06.htm>.

system, establish food sovereignty over their land, and advocate for “historically underfunded food and land cooperators”. The most recently founded organizations such as The National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA)¹⁰⁴ and Regeneration Project¹⁰⁵ founded respectively in 2022 and 2023, also aim at supporting Black communities and their leadership in fighting for their self-determination and food sovereignty. The latter is a non-profit environmental organization based in San Francisco, California. It is focused on ending the climate crisis by tackling a myriad of issues from energy to land and ultimately, to food. Food issues are explored from different angles, but what is important is their take on food deserts. As the majority of food justice organizations, Regeneration does not shy away from powerful terminology and uses the food sovereignty concept as the solution to the food desert issue in the United States.¹⁰⁶

The organizations mentioned above strongly believe that by exercising empowerment over what once belonged to them (lands and resources), only then the historical discrimination politics can be changed. Through cooperation among underprivileged communities, the unequal system can be dismantled and rebuilt as equal and just. These organizations preach concepts of food sovereignty and historical discrimination, as they refer to food insecurity not as an isolated case but as a systematic feature of the “food apartheid”. Since Afro-Indigenous communities have been forced to leave their lands and lost control over what and how to eat, these latter organizations focus on the inherent racism of the system rather than on its health-related consequences.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated how language surrounding food deserts is not universal. The terminology varies and different members of food desert communities tend to use different terms to describe the same problems. As a matter of fact, terminology implies that the communities do not necessarily focus on only one side of the food desert problem. Some of them stick to the mainstream and widely used vocabulary of health and food insecurity; others are trying to shift focus onto racial disparities. Churches’ initiatives seem to deal more with food insecurity rather

¹⁰⁴ ‘National Black Food & Justice Alliance’, National Black Food & Justice Alliance, accessed 6 May 2024, <https://blackfoodjustice.org>.

¹⁰⁵ *Regeneration*, “Nexus | Project Regeneration,” accessed March 17, 2024, <https://regeneration.org/nexus>.

¹⁰⁶ *Regeneration*, ‘Food Apartheid’, Regeneration, accessed 17 March 2024, <https://regeneration.org/nexus/food-apartheid>.

than actually eradicating food deserts. The main narratives used in this case are health and food insecurity discourse, which often then intertwine since the main concern of food deserts is the lack of healthy and nutritious food. This does not mean that their actions have no impact on the overall condition of the food desert inhabitants, as the produce distributed is often healthy and nutritious in addition to coming from the churches' gardens or orchards. However, the lack of alternative food options seems to be tackled as more of a dietary problem, which is alas a mainstream and quite restrictive approach to the food desert issue. Thus, church communities appear to be unable to clearly express the core issues around food deserts – or even use the exact term – however, they contribute by dealing mostly with food insecurity issues by establishing food banks and/or soup kitchens. The Community Missionary Baptist Church in DeSoto, Texas for instance has been helping those struggling with the availability of food (contrary to the availability of healthier food) by establishing food distribution points as well as food pantries.¹⁰⁷ Again, with no allusion to the food desert issue, despite Dallas County having both low-access and low-income factors.¹⁰⁸

The activists and experts usually express the idea that food deserts are part of a bigger environmental/health problem while acknowledging the issues of racial and urban disparities. The multitude of factors considered when talking about food deserts shows just the variety of ways to analyze and talk about this issue. From health to environment to the history of racial discrimination; food deserts can indeed be looked at from a multitude of points of view. Food deserts can be indeed seen as an issue of a “grocery gap”, lack of food access, and a problem of poor education about nutrition and a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle. The activists and environmental and/or social justice experts have been gravitating toward a more racial inequality approach in recent years, as far as criticizing the term “food desert” itself as too reductive of the actual issues the populations in question are facing. Thus, more recently there has been a shift in the vocabulary towards terms such as “food apartheid” especially, to highlight the historical causes and ongoing unfair treatment of food desert areas in the United States, as these are not a natural product, but a human-made issue created by decades of urban and social segregation. However, smaller-scale activists still gravitate toward the health-based approach.

¹⁰⁷ 'Welcome | Community Missionary Baptist Church of DeSoto', Community Missionary Baptist Church, accessed 13 March 2024, <https://www.communitymbc.org/>.

¹⁰⁸ 'USDA ERS - Go to the Atlas'.

The term “food desert” is hardly ever mentioned by organizations as well. Instead, they often use “food justice” and “food sovereignty”, which can be recognized as them fully embracing new terms with utter passion and ferocity. They directly address the issues of inherent racism food system as well as the constant unfair treatment of Black populations as they advocate for Black farmers. Nevertheless, some organizations choose to focus on the food security aspect of the food deserts, without overlooking the historical factors. Overall, the local organizations seem to be aware of the history behind food deserts and often rely on stronger terms to address their concerns.

CHAPTER 3. WHAT DO THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES DO TO OFFER FOOD ALTERNATIVES IN FOOD DESERTS

The food desert communities are not mere victims. Several solutions are and have been carried out throughout the years to help the neighborhoods to have easier access to healthier food or to try and change the urban layout of food deserts altogether. Thus, since the language of these communities has already been analyzed in the first chapter, the real actions and the results of the discourse will be analyzed in this chapter. Different actors focus on different methods and by invoking certain hidden theories – individual responsibility, food insecurity, and food sovereignty, to name a few – behind their speeches about how they address the food desert issue, their approach to the problem differs. The focus of this chapter will thus be the specific course of action the actors aforementioned decided to follow in order to fight against the lack of alternative food options in food deserts. The paragraphs of this chapter will each focus on the most prominent type of action within the food desert areas, rather than on the specific actor that carries it out.

3.1. Fighting food deserts through individual and collective education

Individual responsibility is something that is mentioned by many experts and activists when addressing the food desert issue in the United States. Although implicitly, the focus on education and intimate understanding of the problem – especially among the youngest people – is often presented as a long-term solution, or at least is at the core of the message and course of action pursued by different actors. In this section of the chapter, I will focus on personal or collective education as the focus of actions taken to improve food availability in food desert areas. Education in this case will be analyzed when it is the main course of action.

The educational aspect of the challenge presented by the food desert is often brought up in mainstream government campaigns such as the often-mentioned Michelle Obama's 2011 *Let's Move*¹⁰⁹ campaign or the more recent *Swap Up Your Meal* educational campaign in Oklahoma.¹¹⁰ Although these two campaigns fully acknowledge the issue of the food deserts *per se*, their efforts

¹⁰⁹ 'Let's Move!'

¹¹⁰ Dana E. Wagner et al., 'Swap Up Your Meal: A Mass Media Nutrition Education Campaign for Oklahoma Teens', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 16 (16 August 2022): 10110, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610110>.

are mostly directed at the health issues related to the poor diet of those who live there. Their main focus is not only on the lack of access to healthier food alternatives but also the lack of overall health education regarding nutrition and the long-term consequences of an unhealthy diet, such as obesity.

Local activists and educators mention the education side of the food desert challenge as a way of teaching younger generations about not only the alternative ways of providing healthier food to the table but also teaching them about the very existence of certain vegetables and fruits. In the majority of the cases, there is a great emphasis on individual education about food and nutrition, however, the focus can shift and different aspects of education about food can be highlighted. For instance, in his 2012 TED Talk, Stephen Ritz¹¹¹ – a local South Bronx high school teacher emphasizes the individual education challenge as he introduces his students to new ways of approaching healthy food and the alternatives to fast and nutritious options. Throughout his talk he often mentions classes about food education as he alludes at the lack of knowledge about fresh produce – “[...] thank God Omar knows that the carrots come from the ground and not in a supermarket through a bulletproof window [...]”, - underlining once again the importance of local education especially among the younger population as he refers to his students as “future farmers of America”.¹¹² A similar case is that of Regina Bernard-Carreno.¹¹³ She is also a professor at the CUNY (City University of New York) in New York City, and although her education process has a different goal of emphasizing the historical inequalities of food access, it demonstrates that education about food deserts does not have to be necessarily about fruits and vegetables – teaching about the roots of the issue is as important as teaching about the ways of dealing with it.

Organizations often take a more rounded approach towards education, as it often includes not only notions about healthy nutrition and food but also a bigger environmental and historical knowledge. Thus, education becomes a transversal instrument when it tackles the historical side of the food deserts issue as any actor who decides to focus on that matter is implicitly educating the reader about decades of discrimination. Occasionally, historical education is mixed alongside nutrition and general food knowledge. This could mean that when education is at the center of the actor’s agenda, it will probably preach about nutrition and a healthy lifestyle. This could be due to

¹¹¹ Ritz, ‘A Teacher Growing Green in the South Bronx’.

¹¹² Ritz, “A Teacher Growing Green in the South Bronx,”

¹¹³ Bernard-Carreno, ‘The Underlying Racism of America’s Food System’.

the fact that since education is mostly targeted at younger generation, it has to be more feasible so to be integrated into day-to-day life more naturally. This also is true for families or any average person that has no time or financial means to pursue bigger projects. However, the historical aspect may not stand out yet still be present as background information.

For instance, a non-profit organization – Planting Justice¹¹⁴, founded in 2009 in Oakland, California – is a peculiar case where the food desert issue happens to be in the background of other social issues. Unfair imprisonment within the African American population is the main focus of the organization, however other matters such as economic justice and food sovereignty are also part of the organization’s agenda. Education is provided on social justice and nutrition specifically, through special programs implemented in high schools and nursery sites for those impacted by unequal food access. This program also promotes food education through practice¹¹⁵ in the field, however, this will be discussed in the following section of this chapter. Regeneration Project¹¹⁶ also has a strong agenda in environmental justice and Black emancipation; however, their food apartheid section is quite diverse. Amidst offering alternative ways of viewing food deserts – by denouncing the reductionist term “food desert” itself - Regeneration team also suggests practicable solutions targeted both at individuals as well as the government. The organization provides a list of useful videos and literature about the food desert or better, the food apartheid issue, in the “Learn” section of their website. These vary from TED talks to newspaper articles and podcasts, to promoting other similar organizations that fight food injustice such as Soul Fire Farm. White Lock Farm¹¹⁷, founded in 2010 in Baltimore, Maryland, is a farm that promotes “social equity in the neighborhood” via its urban farm. Alongside farm activities, this organization also promotes education on a variety of topics – from farming techniques to cooking vegetables – through youth programs, school tours, and cooking classes.¹¹⁸ Its contribution to finding a solution to the food desert problem is to educate the younger generations on food access issues alongside nutrition and health, however, the historical side of the matter is left implicit.

¹¹⁴ *Planting Justice*, ‘About Us’, Planting Justice, accessed 26 April 2024, <https://plantingjustice.org/pages/about-us>.

¹¹⁵ *Planting Justice*, ‘Education’, Planting Justice, accessed 2 May 2024, <https://plantingjustice.org/pages/what-we-do/education>.

¹¹⁶ *Regeneration*, ‘Food Apartheid’.

¹¹⁷ ‘About’, Whitelock Community Farm, accessed 2 May 2024, <http://www.whitelockfarm.org/about>.

¹¹⁸ ‘Learning Programs’, Whitelock Community Farm, accessed 2 May 2024, <http://www.whitelockfarm.org/learningprograms>.

Education is also usually made significantly more accessible to everyone. Local communities often account for the fact that on many occasions, following a healthier lifestyle is troublesome and inconvenient for most of the people living in a food desert. Indeed, one of the most prominent obstacles to individual responsibility in environmental politics, for instance, is the gap between what an individual *should* do and what actually they *can* do. Thus, advice about food access, nutrition and a balanced lifestyle is often organized to be fairly easy to comprehend and reenact at home. For example, an alternative way to educate communities is The Food for Thought's *Cook-Along Series*¹¹⁹. This project is in its early stages of development since the organization was founded in 2020; however, its goal is to create an accessible portal through which community members can learn and share nutritious and healthy recipes. Furthermore, it features recipes with ingredients provided by the organization's grocery store and farms. This type of organization decides to focus on the health side of the food desert problem, by tackling the individual's food practices. Cooking series are not a rare phenomenon among local actors in food deserts. It is a rather simple and accessible way of informing a large number of people about ways of incorporating healthy food into their diets, as well as encouraging its purchase.

3.2. Pop-up markets and community gardens: alternative ways of fighting food deserts

While notions about food deserts can be taught implicitly and transversely through education, some actors choose to fight against unequal food access by establishing a list of miscellaneous activities in their areas of interest. Pop-up markets, farm stands, as well as community gardens and others are some of the actions local food desert communities have been implementing to provide alternative food options to their neighbors. In this section of the chapter, I will analyze these alternative ways of battling food desert conditions on a smaller scale; actions that intervene on a more intimate and deeper level within a specific community.

Some of the actors whose primary focus might be considered education also put those teaching into practice. One of those actors is the abovementioned Stephen Ritz.¹²⁰ He mentions the importance of information and education for younger people; however, it is often troublesome to

¹¹⁹ Food For Thought Foundation, 'Cook Along Series', Food for Thought Foundation, accessed 2 May 2024, <https://www.thefoodforthoughtfoundation.org/cooking-along-series>.

¹²⁰ Ritz, 'A Teacher Growing Green in the South Bronx'.

persuade people to pursue more sustainable and/or greener options as they are often difficult to incorporate into daily routines and are more economically challenging.¹²¹ Ritz solves part of the issue by allowing his students to somewhat profit from selling vegetables and building community gardens. His approach fits into the notion that sustainable methods should be tailor-made for the community's needs and not universal, as the majority of environmentally underdeveloped areas are often economically and socially deficient.¹²²

Planting Justice also implements practical solutions alongside educational efforts as one of the mottos of their "Education" page is "Empowerment through practice".¹²³ Practice in this case means establishing several school gardens since their educational programs are mostly aimed at students. These students also participate as volunteers in the food distribution project that gives away free produce and smoothies to Sobrante Park residents each week. The produce is sourced from the local school gardens¹²⁴. The organization also focuses on transforming urban spaces into gardens as well. The alternative term for urban gardens would be "urban farms", however, it is implicit that these urban spaces are rather smaller in size and located within city borders than compared to actual farms discussed later in this chapter.

Community gardens often seem to be one of the most popular remedies against unequal food access. Ron Finley, an activist and a gardener from South Los Angeles, California, also fights to transform used urban spaces in L.A. into community gardens.¹²⁵ The "Gangsta Gardener", as some people might call him, mentions the problem of finding a decent grocery store in food desert areas and how the available produce quality in those stores is considerably inferior to those located in more privileged areas. The difference in food access among different areas in the same city is, according to Ron Finley, the fault of an intentional pattern and design i.e. practices of redlining¹²⁶ and historical urban inequality which he decided to change "[...] with my garden" and by starting to grow his own food.¹²⁷ His ultimate goal is to "redesign the communities" in order to readjust them to local needs and rewrite the old laws that keep those areas from making positive changes

¹²¹ DeSombre, 'Individual Behavior and Global Environmental Problems'.

¹²² O'Rourke and Lollo, 'Transforming Consumption'.

¹²³ 'Education', *Planting Justice*

¹²⁴ *Planting Justice*, 'Food Distribution', Planting Justice, accessed 5 May 2024, <https://plantingjustice.org/pages/what-we-do/food-distribution>.

¹²⁵ Finley, 'Ron Finley'.

¹²⁶ Shaker et al., 'Redlining, Racism and Food Access in US Urban Cores'.

¹²⁷ 'Ron Finley Project'.

in their neighborhoods. Harlem Grown Farms¹²⁸ has similar intentions to Ron Finley, as they advocate for urban renovation and transformation of abandoned lots in Harlem into either urban gardens, greenhouses or school gardens. These urban farms, however, do not necessarily include farming activities *per se*, as some of them serve as recreational parks and green spaces for children in an otherwise busy city.

Similarly, Soil Generation¹²⁹ - a Black and Brown collective of women farmers founded in 2013 - fights against an unequal food system and advocates for land and resource redistribution. In 2019 the collective was hired by Philadelphia Parks and Recreation to co-develop a plan and redesign Philadelphia's urban community space. Soil Generation explicitly puts focus on the urban inequality system that historically isolated and displaced entire Black and Brown communities as well as the lack of control over food access.¹³⁰ They advocate for the construction of urban gardens or small farms in the most intense areas of the city, to facilitate access to healthier food alternatives as well as to regain control over the land.

Community gardens are also one of the most popular options implemented by the local community churches. For instance, as mentioned in a PBS episode¹³¹, the local church of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, has an edible orchard accessible to volunteers as well as used to harvest produce that then will be distributed to those in need. The Canaan Community Church¹³² also took part in community garden projects, while other churches mostly rely on food distribution services which – as already mentioned in the first chapter – usually tackle the food insecurity matter of the areas but not necessarily the core of the food desert issue itself. Nevertheless, not all churches partake solely in gardening or food distribution activities, as some of them decided to go a step further in battling the food desert issue. This will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Other activities such as pop-up or mobile markets are also popular within food desert communities. White Lock Farm¹³³ for instance, offers services such as a mobile market as well as a farm stand. The latter is a pop-up stand that operates one day a week in one location in Reservoir

¹²⁸ *Harlem Grown*, 'About: Harlem Grown'.

¹³⁰ Downey, 'Spatial Measurement, Geography, and Urban Racial Inequality'.

¹³¹ *Intersections | Food Deserts | Season 3 | Episode 5 | PBS*.

¹³² 'Canaan Community Church'.

¹³³ 'About', *White Lock Farms*

Hill. The mobile market, while also operating once a week, moves through multiple locations of Reservoir Hill. The produce sold comes from the White Lock Farm itself. Another similar example, although on a smaller scale, would be that of Forty Acres Fresh Market.¹³⁴ Founded in and operated by Liz Abunaw, Forty Acres Fresh Market opened in 2017 as a response to the lack of healthy and fresh food on Chicago's West Side. Her market sells fresh produce at low prices in pop-up market locations across Chicago West Side, alongside a pick-up/delivery option. Fresh Truck is a mobile food market founded by Josh Trautwein and co-founded by Annika Morgan in 2013 in Boston, Massachusetts. The initiative is a response to the lack of solutions regarding access to healthier food options in the Charlestown neighborhood, thus the founders decided to redesign the concept of a traditional grocery store and "bring food close to the people that need it the most".¹³⁵ While they battle against unequal food access, their primary mission is to improve the health of the local community by establishing a weekly market as well as an online grocery shop.

3.3. Fighting food deserts through farming and land reclamation

Local farms can be considered the most prominent side of all of the local community actions. That does not mean that the previously mentioned initiatives are trivial or bear no visible consequences. However, while educational projects and community gardens and similar impact some of the food desert areas, advocating for farming and the subsequent reclaiming of lands alludes to a bigger venture. Local actors that advocate for farming, usually also address the lack of control over the lands by Black and Native communities who were forced to move out due to redlining politics and gentrification of urban areas. Implementing extensive farming activities thus supports food sovereignty theories about giving back control over land, resources and means of production to the local populations.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, not all actors that promote farming initiatives advocate food sovereignty. In this section of the chapter, I will analyze the primary sources that advocate mostly for farming as an action against the existence of food deserts.

¹³⁴ 'ABOUT', Forty Acres Fresh, accessed 5 May 2024, <https://www.fortyacresfreshmarket.com/about>.

¹³⁵ *Fresh Truck*, 'Who We Are', Fresh Truck, accessed 5 May 2024, <https://www.freshtruck.org/who-we-are/>.

¹³⁶ Pimbert, 'Towards Food Sovereignty'.

The Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network¹³⁷ (DBCFSN), for instance, promotes Black food sovereignty. While addressing historical inequalities and inherent food system injustice, they operate D-Town Farm – the largest farm in Detroit. This seven-acre-large property allows for a small staff and some volunteers to partake in the production of locally and sustainably grown fruits and vegetables. In 2020 the organization’s effort culminated in the creation of the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund¹³⁸, which allows for Black farmers to purchase used spaces in the Detroit City and transform them into farming lands. This project aims to expand the Black farming network and redesign the food system, by providing the local community with fresh produce from the land they own.

Similarly, Soul Fire Farm also advocates for an Afro-Indigenous-led farm community “[...] committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system”.¹³⁹ Their focus is on Black and Brown farmers, specifically their agricultural education as well as the reclaiming of the lands that once belonged to their ancestors. Their teachings are passed to the community specifically through farming practices; however, their major focus are the farms themselves. The ultimate goal is to establish a strong farming community, connected to its Afro-Indigenous roots as well as to eradicate the inherent racist discrimination present in the current food system.

The National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA)¹⁴⁰ also advocated for hundreds of rural Black farmers and their right to own and manage their lands. What is particularly interesting about this organization is that it aims to create a unified front of Black and Brown farmers. In order to achieve so, they created a “food map” - or better - a farm map, that helps to identify just how many Black-owned farms of any size all across the United States.¹⁴¹ Anyone who owns a farm can fill out a form and be put on a map. In the long term, this initiative will contribute to the creation of a connected farming community with the consequent development of “local maps of food infrastructure”, similar to the USDA Atlases.

The Black Urban Growers, or BUGs, is the biggest Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners National Conference in the United States. While advocating for the same issues mentioned above,

¹³⁷ ‘Home: Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network’.

¹³⁸ ‘Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund - ABOUT US’, Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund - ABOUT US, accessed 6 May 2024, https://www.detroitblackfarmer.com/about_us.

¹³⁹ ‘SOUL FIRE FARM’, SOUL FIRE FARM, accessed 5 May 2024, <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/>.

¹⁴⁰ ‘National Black Food & Justice Alliance’.

¹⁴¹ ‘Food Map & Directory’, National Black Food & Justice Alliance, accessed 6 May 2024, <https://blackfoodjustice.org/food-map-director>.

i.e. food sovereignty, food justice, Black agriculture and similar, the BUGs conferences allow for community farm organizations to come together once a year in different areas of the country. Each organization then has a spokesperson, allowing for dialogue around land sovereignty to flow and ideas exchange to thrive, supported by workshops and farm tours in the surrounding areas. Before BUG, however, it is worth mentioning that another similar organization already existed. Founded in 2006, the Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network (SAAFON) is a non-profit farmers' organization based in Atlanta, Georgia. In the same way as BUGs, SAAFON advocates for Afro-American farmers and seeks to “create a just and sustainable food system”. Unlike BUGs, however, this organization mostly promotes farming practices in the Southeastern region of the United States, now representing ten states.

An interesting case is that of the Black Church Food Security Network. Unlike the organizations mentioned up until now, the BCFSN was founded in 2015 with the goal of organizing a supply chain between Black Churches and Black farmers in North Carolina and Virginia.¹⁴² Its foundation derives from frustration with food access and the lack of positive change within the community from the “usual” church initiatives such as food distribution and church gardens. Rev. Heber Brown III of Pleasant Hope Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland, then decided instead to cooperate with other Black churches and Black farmers and create a “Black-owned food system”. The organization has since grown outside Maryland. Whenever churches have been mentioned in this thesis, their efforts in food deserts have often been limited to tackling food insecurity, even when providing fresh healthy produce from their gardens or orchards. In this case, a switch to a stronger language i.e. “Black-owned food system” alongside choosing to cooperate with organizations that promote farming and land reclamation, led otherwise more passive actors such as local churches to act more prominently. Their initiatives now include promoting farming activities and local farms as well as encouraging the local community to buy produce from Black-owned businesses.¹⁴³

It can be argued that all these organizations use education, farming education specifically, as a tool to promote Black and Brown-owned farms as well as advocate for food and land self-determination. However, it is important to distinguish the first section of this chapter from this one. Education is indeed used transversally among different activists and organizations in food desert

¹⁴² 'About Us', Black Church Food Security Network, accessed 6 May 2024, <https://blackchurchfoodsecurity.net/about-us/>.

¹⁴³ tintedagency, 'Advancing Food Sovereignty In Atlanta For Earth Day!', Black Church Food Security Network, 30 April 2024, <https://blackchurchfoodsecurity.net/2024/04/advancing-food-sovereignty-in-atlanta-for-earth-day/>.

areas, yet here education is not at the core of what these organizations are trying to achieve, that is education is not the ultimate solution nor the ultimate goal. These organizations, namely Soul Fire Farm, the DBCFSN, the NBFJA and BUGs, for example, are actively working on bettering as well as expanding farmlands owned by Afro-Indigenous communities with the specific goal of creating an equal food system as well as to “nurture collective Black agrarian leadership and reimagine Black futures”.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated just how much the initiatives vary in nature and how many solutions the local communities has carried out. In this case, it was more challenging to regroup the actors as lots of community efforts are transversal and do not necessarily depend on the specific type of actor. However, by analyzing the most prominent examples of local communities acting against food deserts, it is clear that there are distinct measures taken to offer alternative food options to the food desert communities. Education, miscellaneous endeavors such as popup markets and community gardens and finally, farms are among the most popular activities. Food distribution, cooking classes, and temporary healthy food stands are also beneficial to the food desert neighborhoods, nonetheless for the purposes of this thesis it was important to identify the most prominent features of local communities’ actions.

Having said that, educational measures are quite widespread within local communities. Fitting into the narrative that more often than not individuals lack complete information in order to ultimately change their behavioral patterns¹⁴⁵, educational efforts from local actors means that they give basic knowledge to the local populations. This would also mean that possessing the necessary information about their situation makes it easier for them to adapt to the more sustainable or just alternative solutions to the problem.¹⁴⁶ The actors that mainly focus on education tend to prioritize health and nutrition knowledge rather than historical facts about urban inequality and injustice, yet they do educate regarding unequal food access. However, unlike the governmental initiatives that emphasize the poor diet and the consequent diseases that derive from it, local actors

¹⁴⁴ ‘Home: Black Urban Growers’.

¹⁴⁵ O’Rourke and Lollo, ‘Transforming Consumption’.

¹⁴⁶ Gert Spaargaren, ‘Sustainable Consumption: A Theoretical and Environmental Policy Perspective’, *Society and Natural Resources*, 16 (2003): 687 – 701

underline the importance of knowing what healthy food looks like, where to get it from and what to do with it. Yet, the reason why the historical context is mainly let out could be more practical than ideological. Since the majority of educational efforts are targeted toward younger generations, more feasible and day-to-day solutions might be the most effective ones in the long term. This follows the notion that it is more challenging to persuade individuals to act a certain way when there is no link to their daily routine, especially if it is more costly.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, if the actors frame the food desert issue from a health point of view, their educational efforts will tackle mostly health and nutrition. However, education in some cases also tackles more practical tasks such as gardening or farming.

Miscellaneous activities, the most popular being pop-up markets and community gardens, are also among some of the most practiced activities in the food desert areas. While education is something that actors do sometimes implicitly through their actions, stands and gardens are a specific course of action adapted to battle food access and food insecurity. Indeed, these pop-up stands, and urban greenspaces aim at offering alternative low-priced food options (healthier and fresher), as well as giving basic food access since the inhabitants of food deserts generally have low-income rates and limited access to the nearest grocery store.¹⁴⁸ Thus, since these actors see the core of the food desert problem being the lack of healthier and more affordable food options, as well as the absence of grocery stores, they battle mostly food insecurity.¹⁴⁹

Finally, farming practices are among the most significant and far-reaching actions of the local communities. These are mostly carried out by larger non-profit organizations and use strong language and almost completely forsake the term “food desert”. By basing their activity on concepts of food sovereignty, food apartheid, and/or food justice, these actors (mostly local farmers or activists) advocate for drastic changes in the current food system such as land reclamation, justice for Black-owned farms and control over resources and means of production and redistribution of produce.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, these organizations collaborate with each other or are aware that the collective effort has to ultimately bring about the creation of a new equal food system in addition to redesigned urban city plans. They do operate on a smaller scale as well, as

¹⁴⁷ DeSombre, ‘Individual Behavior and Global Environmental Problems’.

¹⁴⁸ ‘USDA ERS - Go to the Atlas’.

¹⁴⁹ Miller, ‘Food Insecurity in the US’.

¹⁵⁰ Jarosz, ‘Comparing Food Security and Food Sovereignty Discourses’.

they often distribute the grown produce from their farm to the local populations, yet their focus is on a larger structure of the American farming system.

CHAPTER 4. CHALLENGING FOOD DESERTS: ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES

The third and final chapter of this thesis will finally explore how the language and the actions of the local communities impact food deserts. By drawing from the analysis of the language of the first chapter and the list of initiatives of the second one, this chapter will encapsulate the effects that locals have on their neighborhoods in food deserts. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine who exactly takes advantage of community endeavors. Will that be community gardens, pop-up markets, or farming practices, it is important to understand that each of these targets a different kind of group of inhabitants due to the nature of the activity or the language used to describe it. In the following sections, the entirety of the analysis will be drawn into one essential question: how do these actions play out in practice? I will analyze to what extent these local communities have been able to achieve their goals by taking into consideration their accomplishments, failures, and challenges.

4.1. Who benefits from the food alternatives offered by local communities?

As we have seen in previous chapters, local communities offer a variety of means to access healthier and more nutritious food alternatives in the food desert areas. However, these differ in nature, thus they do not target or are not completely accessible to all the inhabitants of food deserts. This is not an imperative flaw of these actions, as the variety of endeavors and the language used simply attracts the crowds that need that offer the most. The most noticeable community actions have proven to be pop-up markets, farm stands, community gardens and larger farms; all of these initiatives by nature target different kinds of people. Consequently, different “components” of the food desert issue are being tackled. Some of these initiatives offer alternatives to those inhabitants who are in need of any food; others offer healthier food alternatives.

Local churches are prominent actors in the food desert communities. Indeed, since they are considered to be the heart of communities and known for their charity endeavors, they are often featured in books and media about food deserts. In the 2015 “Living in a Food Desert” documentary, local churches in Virginia are seen doing either food distribution services or small

gardening projects.¹⁵¹ There is a variety of people coming to church to benefit from those services. Families of all kinds and elderly people are usually those who show up the most. These categories often suffer from food insecurity issues and are the same time attendees of local churches. Not to mention that elderly people often cannot drive or do not have a driving vehicle; thus, these services suit them the most.

Small or urban gardens, in addition to pop-up markets also feed these food alternatives to the same audience as local churches. However, the number of those who benefit from these initiatives might be bigger since these actions are usually carried out through small businesses. While local churches do not regularly update their websites (if there is one), smaller businesses tend to have a regular schedule and those who advocate for urban gardens are vocal about it. Some of the examples are Fresh Truck, Forty Acres Fresh and Whitelock Farms.¹⁵² This means that the neighborhood is well-advertised and kept updated. Moreover, a 2022 study confirms that usually food-insecure people above the age of sixty benefit from the mobile or pop-up markets.¹⁵³ Some occasional events during which pop-up markets target a specific group of people might benefit younger generations as well.¹⁵⁴

Educational activities are mostly directed towards younger generations. From local teachers to non-profit organizations, the young people are seen as the future of Black and Native communities and have the responsibility of learning and sharing knowledge about a just and sustainable food system. Having said that, teachers like Carreno¹⁵⁵ and Ritz¹⁵⁶ alongside teaching their students about farming practices, health and nutrition also allow them to bring back home the produce. Bigger projects also combine food distribution and farming/gardening. Thus, younger generations may benefit from alternative food options by knowing about healthy diets rather than actively buying the produce offered.

Lastly, non-profit farming organizations target the local areas and since they advocate for a change within the current food system structure, their efforts might be more far-reaching.

¹⁵¹ *Living In a Food Desert Documentary*.

¹⁵² This organization's event page is not updated anymore; however, their Instagram page is.

¹⁵³ Lily K. Villa et al., 'Mobile Pantries Can Serve the Most Food Insecure Populations', *Health Equity* 6, no. 1 (24 January 2022): 49–54, <https://doi.org/10.1089/heap.2021.0006>.

¹⁵⁴ Cassidy Jensen, 'Markets Provide Free Nutritious Food to Students, Families', *Street Sense Media*, 16 November 2016, <https://streetsensemedia.org/article/food-security-kids-healthy-cooking/>.

¹⁵⁵ Regina Bernard-Carreno, 'The Underlying Racism of America's Food System'.

¹⁵⁶ Ritz, 'A Teacher Growing Green in the South Bronx'.

Organizations such as Soul Fire Farm, the Detroit Black Community Food Sovereignty Network, and the Black Food Security Network, advocate for Black-owned farmers thus their agendas usually include land expansion and massive food distribution projects. Actions like this influence the entire area they operate in since they do not target a particular group of people.

4.2. Misunderstanding of the issue: miscellaneous endeavors

The majority of people in the food deserts suffer from food insecurity. However - as already mentioned in the introduction – “food insecurity” and “food desert” are two different issues.¹⁵⁷ It is indeed a great misconception that helping out people who have limited or uncertain access to affordable and nutritious food¹⁵⁸ has a considerable impact on the eradication of food deserts. While food insecurity is a big issue in the United States, that only worsened with the outbreak of COVID-19¹⁵⁹, the measures implemented to help those in need do not help necessarily tackle the core issues of urban and racial inequality in food desert areas. This might be considered one of the main issues of some of the local community actions – the misunderstanding of the problem itself.

Both Kolb and Singh¹⁶⁰ in their respective research, underline that while food stamps and food distribution centers usually help out with the lack of food and/or food access, they do not guarantee that those people have access to healthy and nutritious food options. That is the case for many families that live in food deserts and/or suffer from food insecurity. They might have access and enough financial means to afford a healthier diet, however, the very way of living and the meaning they put into what food represents to them withholds them from taking advantage of healthier options.¹⁶¹ Consequently, the usual local community actions - such as pop-up markets and or food trucks - that might have the intention of bringing fresh and healthy produce to the neighbors, might fall short in their mission to do so. Additionally, their efforts might just tackle the food insecurity issue of the food deserts. The pop-up markets, albeit selling fresh produce, usually also deal with food insecurity issues, intentionally or unintentionally it might be. For instance, the We Don't

¹⁵⁷ Kenneth H. Kolb, *Retail Inequality*, 46 – 50

¹⁵⁸ “Food Accessibility, Insecurity and Health Outcomes,” NIMHD, accessed January 8, 2024,

¹⁵⁹ Naseem S. Miller, “Food Insecurity in the US: An Explainer and Research Roundup,” *The Journalist's Resource* (blog), September 27, 2022, <https://journalistsresource.org/home/food-insecurity-health/>.

¹⁶⁰ Priya Fielding-Singh, *How the Other Half Eats*

¹⁶¹ Singh, *How the Other Half Eats*, 248 - 282

Waste organization battles unequal food access and advocates for a no-waste suitable food system, however, their mobile markets do not significantly change the current status of food desert existence.¹⁶² A 2013 study on the efficiency of pop-up markets also suggests that the majority of shoppers choose not to benefit from these food alternative outlets because they are either unaware of their existence or it is simply not convenient.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, pop-up markets are still selling fresh produce and advocate for healthier affordable lifestyles within the food desert areas. Fresh Truck¹⁶⁴ and Forty Acres Fresh Market¹⁶⁵, for instance, might unintentionally deal predominantly with food insecurity, however, by offering produce at affordable prices and advertising nutritious food options they might reach a wider audience and attract more buyers.

Other local community initiatives that might deal with food insecurity issues are the community gardens. The community gardens of the local churches as the one in Mecklenburg County¹⁶⁶ and many others¹⁶⁷ battle mainly the issues connected to food insecurity. Indeed, the community churches, as already seen in the first chapter, mainly refer to the food desert issue as a matter of unequal food access. The founder of the Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN), Rev. Heber Brown, decided to switch his strategy after being frustrated “with food access and charity models”¹⁶⁸. After expanding his community garden activities to a regional level that involved local Black-owned farms as well as the creation of a network of local Black-owned churches, his involvement within the food desert community increased. Instead of having a small community garden that mainly serves the immediate neighbors, the change of theoretical framework from “food insecurity” to a more racialized discourse changes the size and the impact of actions as well.¹⁶⁹ Despite that, small community gardens do help to promote and give access to healthier food in desert areas, although it has more chances to benefit those who live in the

¹⁶² Caroline Hissong, ‘How Mobile Food Markets Are Evolving to Fight Increased Food Insecurity’, *We Don’t Waste*, 11 April 2023, <https://www.wedontwaste.org/how-the-mobile-food-markets-are-evolving-to-fight-increased-food-insecurity/>.

¹⁶³ Lydia Zepeda and Anna Reznickova, ‘Measuring Effects of Mobile Markets on Healthy Food Choices’ (University of Wisconsin, November 2013), <https://doi.org/10.9752/142.11-2013>.

¹⁶⁴ *Fresh Truck*, ‘Who We Are’.

¹⁶⁵ *Forty Acres Fresh Market*, ‘ABOUT’.

¹⁶⁶ *FOOD DESERTS*.

¹⁶⁷ *Living In a Food Desert Documentary*.

¹⁶⁸ ‘About Us’.

¹⁶⁹ The BCFSN website never mentions “food sovereignty” or similar, however, there is an explicit emphasis on Black farmers and the Black community.

immediate areas.¹⁷⁰ Since one of the issues of food deserts is the lack of transportation, combined with the low-income indexes that means that not all the households within food desert areas can afford to have a drivable vehicle.¹⁷¹ Hence, the initiatives will only yield positive results for those who can afford to go there.

Having said that, the food distribution initiatives in addition to pop-up markets and community gardens do indeed ameliorate the food alternatives present in the areas, although not to the degree that might cross them off the food desert list.¹⁷² A prominent example of a successful community garden project is the Ron Finley Project.¹⁷³ After receiving a warrant for transforming an unused urban space into a community garden, Ron created a petition signed by hundreds of South Los Angeles residents. With this collective effort, in 2013, Ron's initiative managed to change L.A. law about unused urban lots and since then no permit has been required to create gardens on Los Angeles City parkways.¹⁷⁴

However, it does indeed depend on the degree of knowledge and motivation that communities have, since the availability of healthier options does not necessarily mean these options will be consumed.¹⁷⁵ Factors such as access to the food, the target audience and generally the choice of the conceptual frameworks to address the lack of food access will have a different impact. The stronger the language, the bigger the agendas, and thus, the bigger the efficiency. As the BCFSN example shows, better knowledge of the food desert issue and its evolution within the Afro-African community might just yield better results.

¹⁷⁰ Andrew Moore, 'Building a Case for Community Gardens', *College of Natural Resources News* (blog), 1 June 2021, <https://cnr.ncsu.edu/news/2021/06/community-gardens/>.

¹⁷¹ Curtis Jalen Antrum, Molly E. Waring, and Kristen Cooksey Stowers, 'Personal Vehicle Use and Food Security among US Adults Who Are Primary Shoppers for Households with Children', *Discover Food* 3, no. 1 (2023): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44187-023-00048-6>.

¹⁷² Lydia Zepeda and Anna Reznickova, 'Measuring Effects of Mobile Markets on Healthy Food Choices'. "Measuring Effects of Mobile Markets on Healthy Food Choices"

¹⁷³ 'Ron Finley Project'.

¹⁷⁴ Kate Torgovnick May, 'No More Citations for Curbside Veggies in Los Angeles | TED Blog', *TED Blog* (blog), 16 August 2013, <https://blog.ted.com/no-more-citations-for-curbside-veggies-in-los-angeles/>.

¹⁷⁵ Alexandra Sifferlin, 'Can "Pop-Up" Grocery Stores Solve the Problem of Food Deserts?', *Time*, 24 July 2012, <https://healthland.time.com/2012/07/24/can-pop-up-grocery-stores-solve-the-problem-of-food-deserts/>.

4.3. Impact of different educational frameworks

As said in the second chapter, the educational efforts might be seen as more of a transversal kind of action. Mainly, the actors that chose to focus on education usually do it from a health point of view, emphasizing the importance of a healthy diet and teaching about the benefits of using fresh produce. However, education can also extend to more historical kind of knowledge. The difference in framing the issue results in distinct approaches. This might explain why smaller non-profit organizations who chose to talk about health benefits mainly pursue miscellaneous activities mentioned above such as pop-up markets and urban gardens. Larger groups adopt a more direct approach and stronger language, as seen in the first chapter of this thesis. By basing their actions on the food sovereignty theory, it leads to a deeper understanding of the racial nuances of the food desert issue. That does not mean that those actors who frame food deserts within the health crises framework are unaware of the racial segregation and gentrification that caused them to exist. However, those who tend to use more advanced and updated terminology act accordingly without digressing into the mainstream line of thinking.

Health education in food deserts is usually directed towards younger generations. Unlike governmental programs such as Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!*¹⁷⁶ which mainly educate about a healthier diet, local organizations teach about sustainable nutrition in addition to how and where the produce comes from. Planting Justice¹⁷⁷, for instance, has 2500 youth participants in their school educational program each year, as well as offering paid internships. White Lock Farms also offers youth programs with an emphasis on nutrition, gardening practices, and creating a sustainable food system.¹⁷⁸ Student education is also encouraged by local teachers, as seen in the example of Stephen Ritz in South Bronx.¹⁷⁹ In all these cases, health education is directed towards the creation of urban gardens or generally, serves as a tool to expand on the knowledge of sustainable eating. The latter is also supported by cooking classes, which are advertised by organizations such as, for example, White Lock Farms and Food for Thought.¹⁸⁰ Education about better nutrition and its peculiarities is important, however, the adults within the household are

¹⁷⁶ 'Let's Move!'

¹⁷⁷ 'Education'.

¹⁷⁸ 'Learning Programs'.

¹⁷⁹ Ritz, 'A Teacher Growing Green in the South Bronx'.

¹⁸⁰ 'Cook Along Series'.

ultimately those who decide what is going to be put on the table. Singh's insight into the four families that live in food desert areas suggests that even if there is knowledge about healthy nutrition, the means or the right conditions to observe it are not necessarily present. For instance, healthy food in many cases represents a "status quo", thus certain produce (usually the more expensive one) is wrongly regarded as the healthiest above all other products.¹⁸¹ Moreover, the issue of preferring to spend funds on things that require immediate attention, such as bills, rent or gas, usually surpasses the need to provide healthier nutrition. Regardless of these drawbacks, local organizations and actors who encourage healthier diets usually provide means to acquire fresh produce at lower prices.

A representative model of education with an emphasis on historical inequalities would be that of the Soul Fire Farm. While there are still mentions of healthy foods and nutritious diets, the main point of this organization is to teach about "food justice terminology" and develop "a commitment to personal and community food sovereignty".¹⁸² Similarly, Heal Food Alliance – a national coalition, founded in 2017, representing more than fifty-five organizations - developed a political leadership program that aims to train young leaders in democratic and inclusive food systems.¹⁸³ Although the two organizations use different terms when speaking about the same problems of food inequality, they do not focus on health-related issues of that food system. Encouraging dialogue around food justice, food sovereignty or food apartheid pushes towards more political and wide-reaching actions. The message that these organizations share is that of the creation of a stronger Afro-Indigenous community, while also advocating for Afro-Indigenous farmers and food workers. Consequently, their actions are always directed towards the establishment of a just food system, which requires spreading the knowledge about the racial and urban inequalities and historical discrimination of the Black and Native communities. Other similar organizations such as BUGs or the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA) do not offer any educational program and do not emphasize the educational aspect of their mission. However, the educational effort in historical inequalities may be an implicit feature for anyone who decides to join their cause. As they promote Black self-determination and sustainable farming

¹⁸¹ Singh, *How the Other Half Eats*, 101 - 128

¹⁸² 'Youth Program', SOUL FIRE FARM, 26 October 2014, <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/programs/youth-program/>.

¹⁸³ 'Meet the Leaders Who Are Working to Transform Our Food and Farm Systems', HEAL Food Alliance, accessed 8 May 2024, <https://healfoodalliance.org/heal-school-of-political-leadership/>.

practices, they also preach theories of food sovereignty which are, more specifically land reclamation, control of the resources and means of production.¹⁸⁴

4.4. Farming organizations' line of action

Hence, farming organizations, in the broader sense, might have more impact on food deserts. Since they operate on a regional or national scale while also advocating for far-reaching causes that would bring about substantial change in the current food system and urban structure in the United States, their efforts aimed at eradicating the historical causes of food deserts' existence. Organizations such as the DBCFSN, Soul Fire Farm, the NBFJA and BUGs have a specific agenda that they are trying to achieve. This is done through numerous campaigns, workshops and conferences as these organizations make an effort to build a united Afro-American community. However, these organizations do not survive on merely good intentions and strong willpower.

Non-profit organizations sustain themselves through donations and occasional governmental funding. The majority of them list their goals and their achievements on their websites. For instance, Soul Fire Farm¹⁸⁵ and the DBCFSN¹⁸⁶ have managed to achieve goals such as land distribution to Black and Native farmers, an increase in members, more media coverage and being able to finance more scholarships. It goes without saying that food distribution from their farms is an activity all these organizations pursue. However, since their goal is to redesign urban space and change the ongoing farm laws, not always their efforts are repaid. One of the most unfortunate cases is that of the Growing Power farms. Founded in 1993 by Will Allen, thus not necessarily part of this thesis *per se*, it was an urban agriculture non-profit organization that specialized in creating community gardens, soul reclamation, food distribution and other gardening and farming practices. Unfortunately, after almost two decades of continued activity, Growing Power was forced to permanently shut down in 2017 after going into debt and not being able to be self-sufficient.¹⁸⁷ Some of the initiatives might also not go as well because of government/city hall limits on urban and farm laws. For instance, Soil Generation was commissioned in 2019 by the city of Philadelphia to design a new urban agriculture community plan. The plan was released in

¹⁸⁴ 'Food Sovereignty | Explained', *La Via Campesina*

¹⁸⁵ '2023 Annual Report', SOUL FIRE FARM, 1 April 2023, <https://www.soulfirefarm.org/about/annualreport/>.

¹⁸⁶ 'Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund - ABOUT US'.

¹⁸⁷ Stephen Satterfield, 'Behind the Rise and Fall of Growing Power', *Civil Eats*, 13 March 2018, <https://civileats.com/2018/03/13/behind-the-rise-and-fall-of-growing-power/>.

2023, yet the organization is not satisfied with the overall results as the original design underwent through some significant changes. The main complaint is that the city hall scraped some important recommendations regarding urban gardens, in addition to weaker linguistic terms than originally planned.¹⁸⁸ Other organizations such as Heal Food Alliance address Congress directly as they present their vision of a just and equal Farm Bill Reform. This includes reforms to the current food system and aims at securing equal resources and opportunities for all food and farm workers and producers. The redesigned Farm Bill also demands funds for underprivileged communities that are suffering from the lack of food access.¹⁸⁹ Ultimately, bigger farming organizations tend to be more ambitious in their goals, yet they still depend on current laws and governmental funding to make their vision become a reality.

It can be argued that the wave of food desert activists that explicitly advocate for food sovereignty grew bigger around 2012 and 2013. Incidentally, in 2013 the Black Lives Matter movement was created as a response to decades of racial conflicts, police brutality against people of color, and an overall unjust system. Despite the fact that initially, this movement stood against police violence against Black people, the base rapidly expanded throughout the years. The issues are no longer limited to police brutality – although it is still the focal point of the movement – but they encompass all types of racial inequality and discrimination against people of color. Thus, the Black Lives Matter movement highlights the role of collective unity and awareness as a powerful tool to change the underlying racist structure that predominantly lies within the United States.¹⁹⁰ That being the case, bigger non-profit organizations after the 2010s tend to use stronger language that does not address the food desert issue per se but advocates for Afro-American rights in general; these can be seen as an implicit influence of the Black Lives Matter movement. These organizations preach the notions of Black unity such as healing the ecosystem “impacted by oppressive structures and injustice”¹⁹¹, which are then applied to the theory of food sovereignty. Consequently, the concept of land reclamation, for example, is transformed into *Black and Native*

¹⁸⁸ *Soil Generation*, ‘Urban Agricultural Plan’, SoilGeneration, accessed 8 May 2024, <https://soilgeneration.org/urbanagplan>.

¹⁸⁹ *HEAL Food Alliance*, “What Is the Farm Bill?,” accessed May 8, 2024, <https://healfoodalliance.org/farmbill/>.

¹⁹⁰ Efe Gürçan and Can Donduran, ‘The Formation and Development of the Black Lives Matter Movement: A Political Process Perspective’, *Journal of Political Sciences* 30 (1) (31 March 2021): 151–67, <https://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2021.30.1.871276>.

¹⁹¹ ‘Healing Justice’, Black Lives Matter Impact Report, accessed 12 May 2024, <https://impact.blacklivesmatter.com/healing-justice/>.

land reclamation. This hypothesis would explain, at least partially, the more far-reaching role of these bigger organizations as they do not tackle the consequences of living in food desert areas but the core issues of decades of historical discrimination of people of color.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that not all community actions have the same target audience. Despite their initiatives not being directed at anyone in particular – except educational programs – the language and the nature of the action itself attract different kinds of people. Since food deserts are a complex and multilayered issue, there is a variety of issues such as food insecurity and health problems that might be mistaken for the core of the food deserts problem. Nonetheless, these initiatives still help out those in need since access to nutritious food is indeed a consequence of living in these underprivileged areas. However, local endeavors as well as non-profit organizations' projects benefit different audiences and do not reach every inhabitant of the food desert areas.

The achievements, failures and challenges of local communities' actions are also an intricate matter to dissect since it is the combination of the nature of the action itself alongside the theoretical framework they choose (or happen) to follow. Local actors such as community churches often refer to the food desert issue as a problem of food access or a food insecurity crisis, hence their actions tackle mostly those matters and those who are affected by these. However, community churches are well known for their charitable work, hence activities such as food distribution services and soup kitchens were not necessarily designed to deal with food desert problems. Thus, they do not fail to offer food alternatives to the locals; however, their actions have a consequential impact on the state of the food deserts. The same can be said about other miscellaneous endeavors. Some of them act within a health and nutrition framework or address exclusively food insecurity. Despite that, pop-up markets and community gardens organizations do promote equal food justice and a sustainable food system, thus their efforts attempt to tackle bigger issues of inequality of discrimination. Bigger organizations have a more significant impact mainly because of their theoretical framework. They usually choose to forsake the term “food desert” altogether and tackle structural and historical issues of urban and racial discrimination. Their actions are directed towards the creation of a unified Afro-Indigenous community as they fight to change the farm laws about the unequal food system.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has brought the local communities to the center of the debate. Therefore, local actions were analyzed as a whole with the aim of pinpointing specific lines of thought and action of local actors that advocate against food desert conditions. To recall the introduction of this thesis, as Kenneth Kolb says throughout his book *Retail Inequality*, the local communities are not merely helpless victims. Papers about the efficiency of particular local community actions have been published, however, a comprehensive analysis that attempts to understand the pattern of their actions is yet to appear. The nuances of how and what these communities do to challenge their conditions in the food desert regions is an understudied area of this debate. The issue of food deserts then presents a variety of underlying structures and aspects that allow for extensive and multifarious analysis. Thus, this thesis delves deeper into the debate and the perspectives of its inhabitants. It manages to expand more on the inhabitants of the food deserts and fit them in the ongoing debate about the topic. The community is not analyzed solely as a passive subject or strictly from a point of view of the initiatives that tend to attract the most media attention. The local discourse fits within the bigger debate about how food deserts should be addressed, linguistically and practically. Moreover, the local accounts are grouped all together and analyzed as a whole.

Answering the research question

The research question is answered respectively through the three analytical chapters, each giving an insight into different aspects of the food desert community. Chapter 2 analyzed their language and how they frame the issue themselves. The main frameworks of health, food insecurity and food justice are used when talking about the issue, which consequently leads to different types of action. Chapter 3 went through the different initiatives that local inhabitants launched to offer food alternatives in the last decade. These are not limited to rooftop gardens and pop-up markets, by go as far as immense farms and changes in the current agricultural laws. Finally, Chapter 4 explored the results of these actions. In a broader sense, it answered the research question of how the local communities have challenged food deserts and offered alternative food options by analyzing the peculiarities of their achievements and failures.

After analyzing several local communities' testimonies, it seems that the local actors have different ways of framing the food desert issue, reflecting its multifariousness. Small-scale advocates against food deserts such as community churches usually use terms such as "food insecurity" to talk about the issue. However, the churches are known for helping with food insecurity through food distribution services and soup kitchens, thus it is not surprising that even in a different context they stick to the same terminology. Other actors such as mobile market owners or community garden advocates and similar, also mention battling food insecurity as part of their agendas, however, there is a glimpse of the historical side of the food desert issue as they talk about "food justice" and creating an equal and accessible food system. Bigger non-profit organizations are the ones that part ways with the term "food desert" and decide to fully embrace the inherent and structural racial discrimination of those regions. These organizations often emphasize Black and Native communities' struggles with food access and land ownership in the United States, as throughout the decades these communities have been pushed away from their original lands and given fewer opportunities to control their food choices.

There is also a certain diversity in local actions in food deserts, however, I was able to detect a specific pattern. Local communities in many instances, choose to battle food desert conditions through three types of actions: educational initiatives, miscellaneous actions such as pop-up markets and community gardens, and finally the development of an Afro-Indigenous farming community. Educational programs, especially those targeted towards younger generations, are a transversal type of action that many actors may also practice implicitly. However, those who choose to pursue it actively, often go back to the health/nutrition-based approach towards the issue. Their programs focus mainly on teaching about a variety of healthier food options, with additional knowledge about gardening techniques and sometimes cooking recipes. Pop-up markets and community gardens are by far the most popular actions within the local communities in the food deserts, as well as the most discussed among media and academic circles. These usually battle food insecurity and advocate for a healthier lifestyle by offering local fresh produce at lower prices. Farms and farming practices are part of bigger organizations' initiatives. These are often based on theories of food sovereignty; thus, farming implicates land reclamation, the creation of Black farmers' community network, and the rebuilding of the current food system. Local communities' actions do not cover the entirety of the populations in the food deserts; usually, they operate in the surrounding neighborhoods. Mostly, the theoretical framework

determines the impact these actions will have on the food deserts. Community gardens and mobile markets offer solutions to the limited food access and food options. Bigger organizations tend to have a stronger impact for they use updated terminology as they advocate for more significant causes. However, the limit of the non-profit organizations is that they survive solely on donations and governmental funding. Moreover, their agendas are not complete until they are able to make long-lasting changes to the farming and land laws of the United States.

In conclusion, local communities challenge and offer food alternatives in food deserts in multiple ways. They challenge the term food desert by using more empowering terminology, yet a considerable number of local activists adhere to the mainstream definitions of food deserts and their problems. Hence, the issue is challenged to a greater degree only when using stronger and more imposing language such as “food apartheid” and “food sovereignty”. Yet, a variety of food alternatives is offered to the inhabitants of food deserts. All the initiatives offer health and fresh produce; however, they fail to reach the entirety of the local population. Moreover, even though these actions such as community gardens and farmers’ stands achieve the goal of offering produce, they are only temporary solutions to the symptoms of the food desert, not their existence. The analysis shows that the only way to truly challenge food deserts is through the creation of a unified front that advocates for Black and Native rights such as land ownership and food production. Stronger language that emphasizes racial struggles also tends to diverge from a mainstream way of framing the issue. However, smaller initiatives that tackle health and food access/insecurity-related problems should not be discredited since they might be considered the most genuine signs of community resilience. These initiatives are intimate and selfless acts that assist the majority of food desert locals. The complexity of the food desert issue also means that the solutions are not straightforward, and any deed that helps the community to access healthy and nutritious food is useful. However, more organized endeavors might have more far-reaching impacts and more ambitious goals. Farm stands, pop-up markets and food distribution projects do have an impact on some members of the community, however they do not tackle the structural inequalities on the areas. Actors that use stronger language can lead the way to bigger changes within the community, however, even those who do not venture into challenging projects can still emphasize the historical side of the issue.

Limits and weaknesses

Whilst the methodology is well fit for this thesis and its research question, it is limiting in some ways. A qualitative analysis could be paired alongside a quantitative analysis, which could portray a clearer picture of linguistic trends and the impact of the initiatives on the areas of food deserts. For example, the data could be arranged in a way to visualize the percentage of those who tend to use older vocabulary and those who have switched to the updated terminology. Another limit is the source selection. Not all community-centered sources about food deserts have been analyzed, seeing the size of the country. Hence, some of the minor food desert areas have been left out. Moreover, this thesis takes into consideration those sources available on the internet and are easily accessible to everyone. However, these do not represent all the inhabitants of the food deserts. Some areas lack research or are not as well documented as others, thus not all the voices have been analyzed and given proper attention. In this case, the data to conduct proper research was not accessible, and in-person interviews or more internal investigations had to be conducted.

Avenues for future research

This research can be a gateway for a variety of further research on this topic as it did not go in-depth on mainly two aspects. Firstly, the research of the food desert communities can be further explored by expanding the primary source pool as well as adding quantitative analysis to the study. The timeframe can be increased to comprehend different periods and observe the organic change in language and practical approaches of inhabitants of the food deserts. Moreover, there can be drawn connections between the Black Lives Matter Movement and the evolution of the food desert terminology. The impact of the BLM civil rights movements on the issue related to food access and the environment could be an interesting research subject.

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