

A Greener Village: Combating Environmental Injustice Through Urban Farming
Sara Siddiqui • USA • University of Chicago • Chicago, USA • June 15th – August 31st, 2021

The effects of environmental injustice on minority neighborhoods are evident in large burdens of pollution, a lack of green spaces, and a lack of access to affordable and healthy foods. My Davis project, A Greener Village, proposes to address these problems by funding a community-based urban farm in Little Village, Chicago. The project is three-pronged in its contribution to the community. It will provide critical infrastructure to transform what is now a small garden in Little Village into an urban farm, create educational opportunities for marginalized youth, and document cultural work so that the farm becomes a place that the community connects to and claims for themselves.

The Problem:

Latinx immigrants have an increased risk of toxic exposures from air pollutants, lead paint and proximity to hazardous waste sites.¹ Such environmental inequity manifests in higher rates of heart disease, asthma and diabetes in these communities. These disparate health effects are not only related to the lack of culturally tailored environmental health and education resources for Latinx immigrants, but also their greater vulnerabilities to environmental risks due to insecure residency status, lower incomes, and English language deficiencies, all of which limit their participation in environmental decision-making.²

Little Village, home to almost 100,000 people, is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in Chicago. With over 80% of residents being of Mexican descent, it is called the “Mexico of the Midwest,” and ranks consistently highest in air pollution levels across Chicago, being home to an abandoned coal plant that has exposed residents to carcinogens. The delay in and lack of community input surrounding the clean-up of the coal plant add to the long list of environmental injustices burdened by the marginalized community, which also lacks green spaces and accessible, healthy foods for residents.³ As a result, the neighborhood faces many diet-related health issues and food insecurity, with an estimated need for 30,000 to 40,000 meals a month.

The Project:

I will partner with the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) in Chicago. During the pandemic, LVEJO has attempted to address rising hunger by coordinating emergency mutual aid through their Farm Food Familias program in the form of 350 meals every week to local families in Little Village, Englewood, and other poor neighborhoods in Chicago’s South and West sides. This work has been taxing on understaffed and overworked community organizers, like Antonio Lopez and Viviana Moreno, who coordinate with a series of urban farms throughout Chicago to distribute aid. They have been working with Little Village community members on mutual aid projects for decades, and they believe the construction of a community farm in Little Village will provide direct, local access to fresh food to many community members. However, LVEJO’s existing plot of land lacks the infrastructure to enact this vision.

My Davis Project, A Greener Village, will enable the construction of critical farming infrastructure to transform an acre of available land in La Villita Park to an urban farm of a larger scale. The provision of this fundamental infrastructure will lift the community farm over a critical hurdle, so the farm can exist and live on through community support and organizations. The urban farm will serve as a restorative green space for community members, provide mentorship opportunities for minority and immigrant youth, and will be documented throughout its transformation through photography to expand its reach and educate community members.

Besides creating economic opportunity for local immigrants, the urban farm will mitigate food insecurity and increase access to affordable, culturally-affirming, and nutritionally-dense food. Cutting out the middleman between producers and customers, urban farming produces as much as 100 times more food than regular farming per square foot.⁴ The transformation of the acre of available land in La Villita Park into an urban farm will enable community members to survey seasonal produce and grow culturally appropriate foods, using okra to help heal arthritic knees or echinacea to treat pandemic anxieties.

¹ Tessum, Christopher W., et al. “Inequity in Consumption of Goods and Services Adds to Racial–Ethnic Disparities in Air Pollution Exposure.” *PNAS*, National Academy of Sciences, 26 Mar. 2019, www.pnas.org/content/116/13/6001.

² Maldonado, Alejandra, et al. “Exposure to Flood Hazards in Miami and Houston: Are Hispanic Immigrants at Greater Risk than Other Social Groups?” *MDPI*, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 1 Aug. 2016, www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/13/8/775/htm.

³ Guzmán, María Marta. “Little Village Alleges Environmental Racism after Coal Plant Demolition.” *The DePaulia*, 4 Dec. 2020, depaonline.com/48158/news/little-village-alleges-environmental-racism-after-coal-plant-demolition/.

⁴ “Urban Farming: How It Works and Its Multiple Benefits.” *Green and Growing*, 19 Nov. 2019, www.greenandgrowing.org/urban-farming-benefits/.

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Through partnership with LVEJO's Farm Food Familias program, A Greener Village will fully fund the construction and first growing season of the farm, which will be located at La Villita Park, a 21-acre park developed over a remediated Superfund site. Spanning over one acre, the urban farm will include a 500-square-foot vegetable plot, a green house and three bee hives. In future years, livestock including flocks of chickens and more garden space will be added. The farmers will take disease control measures to ensure safety of the soil and produce. No land needs to be bought for my Davis project, as LVEJO representatives who hold the lease to the plot of land have officially signed off on using the available acre on La Villita Park for the urban farm. Produce from the urban farm will go directly to the Farm Food Familias program, whose founders are excited at the prospect of using local, farm-fresh produce in their mutual aid efforts.

Implementation:

In Phase 1 of my Davis Project, from November to January 2021, I formed partnerships and developed a working plan with LVEJO organizers. Phase 2 will take place from April to May 2021 as I recruit five high-school age youth who will be paid throughout the growing season. I will work with Antonio Lopez and Viviana Moreno to develop an experiential curriculum and a safe space for minority youth to explore their interests, work collectively, and expand their understanding of community food system development. From June to August 2021 in Phase 3, I will be present to educate youth about the work we do and lead them in farm tasks so they may provide meaningful help to fight hunger. 30 local immigrant families tending to the current garden in La Villita Park are interested in helping begin operations for the farm. Phase 3 will consist of buying supplies, clearing the land, and working on the land. This includes establishing a toolshed and three beehives with the help of a local immigrant beekeeper. All hives will be registered in the State of Illinois, and partial funds will support two immigrants in taking beekeeping classes to ensure responsible management of the hives. From July to August 2021 in Phase 4, I will use photography to co-create a zine in English and Spanish that documents the cultural work done at the site in collaboration with youth in the community. Youth will be provided with disposable cameras to document their experiences. Zine-making will be done through a series of youth summer workshops, building upon youth mentorship from the growing season. The zine will be a lasting legacy of the project that can be easily expanded and will live on through social media.

Sustainability:

A Greener Village will utilize farming methods such as rainwater harvesting and composting to decrease expenses and increase sustainability as years pass, while building strong community ties. A small portion of the produce and honey harvested from the farm will be sold at a local farmers' market to ensure flows of money back into the farm. By offering a space that provides fresh food, youth mentorship, and education to community members, A Greener Village aims to encourage a movement against hunger and prioritize the involvement of marginalized residents in meaningful community building. As a permanent structure available for continual communal use, the farm will illustrate a model for community-based, social justice-oriented agriculture. A Greener Village is not a one-year experiment. It is a long-term commitment to Little Village. I envision the farm serving as a model of sustainability and reconciliation for other communities fighting hunger. I believe so deeply in this mission, and in its ability to generate everlasting bonds and a tangible impact that can only make Little Village a more healthy, nurturing, and peaceful community for all.

About Me:

I deeply believe in creative and intentional community building, and my project was born out of a desire to give back to a poor, immigrant community like the one I grew up in. The past two summers, I volunteered at an urban farm in the South side of Chicago where I learned urban farming techniques and food systems development in a culturally-appropriate context. These experiences gave me the leadership skills, cultural sensitivity, empathy and commitment to facilitate this work. As a woman of color who has worked with many immigrant organizations, I believe a community farm would address many of the issues facing Little Village while serving as a replicable model for community-based, social justice-oriented agriculture.