

The Emerging Just and Sustainable Food Economy in Boston

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Innovations for Building Community Wealth and Health and Re-Localizing the Food System

By Penn Loh and Glynn Lloyd The current conventional system of food production and distribution – how food comes to most of us every day — is more fragile than most people think. In fact it is less sustainable and less safe than ever as we start seeing the results of this century old experiment of the corporate food system propelled by cheap energy in a warming climate. While a minority can choose (and pay for) more healthy and more sustainable food, the majority are stuck with food that is literally making us sick, produced on the backs of very low paid workers, and exhausting soil, water, and fossil fuel resources in its production and transport. Fixing our food systems is not just planting more gardens or bringing more grocery stores into food deserts. It's about transforming the economy into one that can serve us all, while sustaining the health of people and the planet. While the local and slow food movements are bringing much-needed changes to our food culture, a transformation to a just and sustainable food system will require innovations that can serve the needs of those who need it most. There is an increasing dichotomy – Massachusetts ranked one of the highest states in the nation with a growing gap between the rich and poor.^[i] Amidst some of the wealthiest anywhere in the nation, 11.4% of residents are food insecure.^[ii] A recent study found that 46% of fast food workers in Massachusetts had to rely on public programs – SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit — to meet their basic expenses in 2011.^[iii] But in these communities that are lacking in income and opportunities, we also find innovation is percolating — new ways of doing business that just might be the solutions for the



majority.

In this article, we tell the story of the enterprises sprouting in Roxbury and Dorchester, two of Boston's lower income communities of color. Below are just a few of these ventures and a diagram of how, together, they may be building a more just and sustainable food

economy. (Note that the two authors have been involved in launching and supporting a number of the initiatives profiled in this piece.)

- Youth at [Alternatives for Community & Environment](#) are taking over vacant land (some of which has been idle for more than 4 decades) for raised bed gardens tended by neighbors.
- The [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#) built a greenhouse on their community land trust, which is now being operated by [The Food Project](#) to provide year-round growing space to local residents and organizations.
- [City Growers](#) has pioneered an urban farming model that is proving to be commercially viable, on plots as small as a quarter acre.
- A newly formed worker cooperative, [CERO](#) (Cooperative Energy, Recycling, and Organics), is raising startup financing to provide recycling services and collect food waste.
- Ground has just broken on the [Bornstein and Pearl Small Business Center](#) (developed by the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation), whose anchor tenant will be [Crop Circle Kitchen](#), an incubator for new food processing businesses.
- The [Dorchester Community Food Co-op](#) is developing plans for a worker and community owned store providing affordable and culturally appropriate fresh food.

These sprouts are all home-grown, initiated and led by local residents (mostly people of color), but also partnering with other resources. They are rooted in community building and organizing. Together, they establish more democratic governance over community resources. They span a spectrum of organizational types, from voluntary associations and nonprofit ventures to for-profit enterprises and worker cooperatives. Together they are re-localizing the food system, while also building community wealth and health. They are pointing the way towards how we can build a more just, sustainable, and democratic economy, starting with our food.

History of Neighborhood Struggle

To fully appreciate the emerging vision, you have to start with the reality of the struggles of the neighborhoods. Roxbury and Dorchester are adjoining neighborhoods in Boston, home to about one quarter of Boston residents. They are 75 to over 80% people of color, mostly African American and Latino. They are among the lowest income communities. In 2011, Roxbury's per capita income was just over half of Boston's, and more than 35% of households received Food Stamp aid.^[iv] With this concentration of poverty, the rates of food insecurity and hunger are probably much higher than the 1 in 9 people in Eastern Massachusetts who are food insecure.^[v] Of those served by the food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters, 44% had to choose between paying for food or heat.^[vi] Related to these inequalities in income and access to food are disparities in health. Both Black and Latino residents in Boston (who are heavily concentrated in Roxbury and Dorchester) suffer from worse health. Blacks have 42% higher premature death rates than whites, while Latinos are two and a half times more likely to report that they are unhealthy compared to Whites.^[vii] The City also found that in Roxbury, only 25% of adults reported eating recommended daily fruits and vegetables, while the neighborhood had the highest rates of diabetes and heart disease hospitalization in Boston.^[viii] Following World War II, these neighborhoods, like many other inner city areas, suffered from disinvestment and neglect. Racist banking and housing policies ("redlining") further segregated people of color from opportunity. Urban renewal programs and highway building dealt a further blow to these neighborhoods by taking land and in some cases removing residents. Thus, the disparities in wealth, education, and health are rooted in a history of public policies and economic practices that have systematically marginalized whole neighborhoods. Yet, even with this history of economic challenge, there is a cultural vibrancy and connectedness within these communities. Our communities have more than persevered. The history of these neighborhoods is a story of resilience, resourcefulness, and community coming together.

Innovation out of Necessity

Innovation has been bubbling largely from the people of Roxbury and Dorchester. Numerous local leaders and organizations have taken the initiative, organizing and empowering residents, and forming new institutions to take care of themselves. These have not been limited to nonprofits, but also include locally owned businesses and voluntary associations. Of course, it has also included organizing and demanding a fair share of public resources from government. Innovation has emerged when needed, drawing on the assets at hand. Often times, innovation is seen as the sole domain of the private sector. On the other hand, some look solely to government or the nonprofit sector to remedy historical injustices. In truth, innovation comes from all sectors, in response to compelling needs and spurred by the talent and energy of our communities. Comprehensive solutions must involve government, businesses, and communities and nonprofits. In a world where market competition can be a ruthless race to the bottom, we need all sectors to come together cooperatively to ensure that there are standards in place and the incentives to race to the top. Let us highlight two examples, one in Boston and one in the Basque region of Spain. The local example of the [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#) (DSNI) in Roxbury illustrates this cross-sectoral comprehensive community-driven innovation model. Across the Atlantic the creation of the [Mondragon Corporation](#) models unique enterprises that put local residents in control. By the 1980s, Roxbury and North Dorchester had been devastated by the disinvestment and white flight of the 1960s and 70s. People were literally burning down their homes in order to collect insurance money to be able to move out. More than 1/3 of the land lay vacant – 1300 parcels in a 1.5 square mile area. Residents and community organizations came together to revitalize the Dudley neighborhood and resist gentrification plans that would have transformed the area into hotels and offices serving downtown Boston. DSNI brought together the neighborhood's Black, Latino, and Cape Verdean residents to develop their own comprehensive plan. They successfully pushed the City of Boston to adopt the plan and to give DSNI the power of eminent domain over a 60-acre parcel in the core of the Dudley neighborhood. They established their own community land trust to take ownership over and develop the vacant land. [ix] Now, almost 30 years later, DSNI boasts the development of over 400 new homes and rehabilitation of over 500 homes. Most of these homes are permanently affordable, since they sit on land owned by the nonprofit land trust. In the recent housing crisis, no homes were lost to foreclosure due to predatory loans or homes being “underwater”; in fact in the entire history of the land trust, there have been only four foreclosures, and in each case, the affordability was preserved because of the land trust covenant. [x] These homes were built with the partnership of nonprofit community development corporations as well as private sector financing. In addition to housing, DSNI worked to realize many other aspects of their plan, including parks and gardens, a town common, a community center, a charter school, and a community greenhouse. What's remarkable about DSNI's ventures is that they arose out of crisis and intense participation of the affected community. They required government policies and resources, which, at times, came only in response to neighborhood pressure. They have had private sector partners and investment. Perhaps most important is that they have democratic ownership and accountability. The residents remain firmly in the “driver's seat”. A similar story took place earlier, starting after World War II in Mondragon, a town in the Basque region of Spain that had not yet recovered from the Spanish American War. In this town experiencing poverty, hunger, exile and tension, entered a young priest (Father Arizmendiarieta) who put forth a new way of thinking about advancing community development through democratically owned local businesses. Unlike the top down, winner-take-all mentality prevalent at our business schools, he promoted a cooperative vision and worker ownership and decision making. They started building from the assets already within the community and then built a network of interlinked enterprises throughout the region. But what is so powerful about Mondragon, is that they have created highly competitive companies supported by sophisticated finance, marketing, research and development that support the local economies within this region and also export superior products around the world, resulting in over 80,000 people being employed in almost 300 companies. These cooperatively-led and locally-owned enterprises demonstrate competitive advantage in the market place. (For more on Mondragon's origins and values, see [Juan Leyton's blog](#).) Both these examples display innovation born from histories of necessity.

Emergence of New Community Economy

Innovations are springing forth from many places. And to the extent that these are connecting with each other, a new community economy is emerging. In our diagram, we show just how this web of collaborations might add up to a transformed local food economy. We caution that this picture is not in full operation now, nor may it play out in the way depicted. But these are some of the pieces to keep developing, while local innovators envision and create what is truly possible.

- Community Land Trust

The food system begins with the land. Under the [community land trust](#) form of ownership, the land is owned by a nonprofit that is governed by a community board for the long-term benefit of the public. Not only can land be used for housing, but also for other public purposes, such as urban farms and greenhouses. [Dudley Neighbors Inc.](#), a subsidiary of DSNI, is the formal entity that owns the land on which DSNI developed its affordable housing and the greenhouse. This trust, or another one like it, could then acquire more land in the surrounding neighborhoods for building the urban food system. In fact, the Dudley land trust recently gained ownership over a parcel that had been farmed by the [Food Project](#) on a year-to-year lease basis with the City. Now, the Food Project can gain up to a 99-year lease from the land trust to farm the land.

- Urban Growing

The Food Project, a youth development and urban agriculture nonprofit, is already operating the greenhouse developed by DSNI. They grow enough produce for market to pay much of the operating costs, so that they can offer year-round growing space for local residents and organizations.

[City Growers](#) is a for-profit urban farming venture, co-founded by local entrepreneur Glynn Lloyd (one of the authors). They are proving a commercially successful model for growing on plots as small as a quarter acre and operate several sites in Roxbury and Dorchester, including one of the pilot sites in the City of Boston's urban agricultural initiative. City Growers is looking to acquire more land to support a network of farmers that are being trained by their affiliated nonprofit [Urban Farming Institute of Boston](#) (UFI) and apprenticing with City Growers. Again, long-term tenure to land could be achieved through a land trust form of ownership. City Growers is exploring the development of a producer cooperative among the farmers they train, to pool resources and market under one brand.

The Urban Farming Institute –worked with the city to create and pass [Article 89](#), which amended zoning laws to allow commercial agriculture on the city's vacant lots. UFI is working with [New Entry Sustainable Farming Project](#) to continue to train urban residents to become urban farmers. And UFI has brought together DNI and the Trust for Public Land to move more city land into urban farming

Beyond these larger ventures are numerous backyard gardens and community gardens. ACE's youth campaign [Grow or Die](#) has already taken over 6 vacant sites and built raised bed gardens that are now tended by more than 70 families. A summer 2013 survey of DSNI's core area found more than 65 resident gardens growing more than 50 types of vegetables and fruits, with some over 40 years old. The report estimates a yield of 4400 pounds of produce from these "backyard" gardens (see [blog post here](#)).

- Food Processing

The produce grown from community farms, greenhouses, and gardens not only end up directly on people's plates. They can also supply local food processing businesses. [City Fresh Foods](#) is a catering company that was founded to deliver local, fresh, healthy, and culturally appropriate meals. Part of the reason Glynn Lloyd launched the company in 1994 was to create good jobs for local residents, recycling dollars back into our communities.

[Crop Circle Kitchen](#) already runs a successful kitchen incubator in Jamaica Plain, helping new food businesses get off the ground. It will be the anchor tenant in the new [Pearl and Bornstein Food Production Small Business Center](#). Set to open in spring 2014, this center hopes to produce 150 jobs in its first five years. Recently Crop Circle partnered with a successful chef to purchase and operate a USDA meat packing plant in the heart of Mattapan, expanding the potential to develop a pipeline of local meat products into this burgeoning new local food system.

- Distribution

How to get food to markets is a key challenge, particularly for small producers. Here's where distributors come to play a critical role. Right next to City Fresh Foods is [FoodEx](#), founded in 2009 to connect local producers to wholesale markets at a fair price. FoodEx is developing the platform and warehouse and trucking capacity to enable access for local growers to bigger markets.

- Retail and Consumption

Food finally makes its way to us to be eaten (and hopefully enjoyed). There are a variety of ways that food ends up on our plates, including groceries, restaurants, and cafeterias. The [Dorchester Community Food Co-op](#) has been organizing the past two years to launch a member and worker-owned store providing affordable, fresh, and healthy foods and green products. They also envision a space for community education and cultural activities. So far, they have several hundred members (paying \$100 each), run a winter farmer's market and hold a "Fresh Fridays" festival event in the summer on the site that they are planning for the co-op.

In Dudley Square Roxbury, [Haley House Bakery Café](#) is a social enterprise that grew out of a social service organization providing a soup kitchen and shelter for the homeless in Boston's South End. They started their own farm in central Massachusetts in 1983 to supply their soup kitchen. In 2005, they opened the Café not only to provide dining and catering services but also to run a bakery training program for the recently incarcerated and education programs for youth.

Finally, our public schools and other institutions, such as hospitals and nursing homes have cafeterias that can provide locally grown and produced food to local residents.

- Waste Processing

In a truly sustainable food system, there is zero waste. In ecosystems, wastes (or any organic matter) become food for insects and bacteria, which process this matter back into nutrients that enrich the soil. More and more people are composting these wastes at home, generating rich soil for their gardens. A newly formed worker cooperative [CERO](#) (Cooperative Energy, Recycling, & Organics/Cooperativa Para Energia, Reciclaje & Organicos) plans to help local businesses separate their wastes, increase recycling, and reprocess their food scraps. Starting in July 2014, most big businesses and institutions in Massachusetts will have to separate out their organic waste because of new regulations banning such waste from the regular trash. CERO was created by African American and Latino workers who wanted to create their own green jobs. They recently completed a successful crowd-source fundraising campaign so that they can launch a direct public offering to raise startup capital for trucks and equipment.

How To Get There

This vision of a homegrown sustainable and just community food economy is just emerging. Right now, the entities we have listed already employ hundreds, involve the direct participation of thousands, and provide services and goods to tens of thousands more. The impact on food security and health is measurable. But we know that there is still a long way to go to build a sustainable and just food economy that serves us all. So, how do we nurture these roots and sprouts into a full garden? In

other words, how do we grow to scale? We don't pretend to have all the answers, but we know that there are key challenges and questions that will have to be addressed. We conclude with this list in hopes that we can engage many others in this vision:

- How can we identify, nurture, and nourish the innovators, particularly those coming from more unconventional backgrounds?
- How can we get more people involved to participate in these ventures, organize for supportive public policy and resources, and see themselves as both consumers and producers in this system?
- How can we better educate ourselves and our next generation to envision this new economy?
- How can we strategically align government, private, and nonprofit community partners?
- How can we develop more democratic sources of capital and financing for these ventures?
- How can we better network the different parts of our local food system, or in business terms "strengthen the supply chains"?
- How can local neighborhoods retain control while also partnering with others?

Authors

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[i] Massachusetts ranked 8th among states in inequality between top and bottom in mid-2000s, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (<http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3860>).

[ii] See Project Bread report: http://support.projectbread.org/site/DocServer/Status_Report_2013.pdf?docID=8041.

[iii] See "Fast Food, Poverty Wages: The Public Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Fast-Food Industry" UC Berkeley Labor Center and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Oct 15, 2013.

[iv] All data in this paragraph is from Boston Redevelopment Authority neighborhood reports using American Community Survey 2007-2011 estimates (May 2013).

[v] See "Hunger in Eastern Massachusetts 2010" report by Greater Boston Food Bank. <http://gbfb.org/our-mission/hunger.php>.

[vi] Hunger in Eastern Massachusetts 2010.

[vii] See "Data Report: A presentation and analysis of disparities in Boston" by the Disparities Project of the Boston Public Health Commission, June 2005.

[viii] See "2009 Health of Roxbury Report" by Roxbury Community Alliance for Health, Boston Public Health Commission, and Boston Community Alliance for Health, May 2010.

[ix] For a detailed history of DSNI, see *Streets of Hope* by Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar (1994, South End Press).

[x] Personal communication, Harry Smith, DSNI Director of Sustainable and Economic Development.
