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## LOCAL COMMUNITY INITIATIVE IN TACKLING FOOD DESERT: ACHIEVING FAIR AND SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH MEMPHIS

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of food desert (difficulty in accessing healthy food at affordable prices) is a phenomenon that has long plagued a number of regions in the United States. Uniquely, this issue has a close relationship with racism because the majority of the population living in food desert areas are its black population, such as the area of South Memphis, which in 2019, was nicknamed “The Hunger Capital of America”. This article aims to understand the design and implementation of solutions to the food desert issue in South Memphis using the lens of local food network and just sustainability concept. This study also aims to analyze how racial and class awareness are integrated into solutions formulated by local communities, considering that the majority of the population living in the food desert area are black and in the lower middle-class group. Related to the sustainable aspect of the just sustainability concept, this study will also evaluate how initiatives such as farmer’s markets and community kitchens in the form of non-commercial practices, can be an effective and sustainable solution to the food desert issue in the long term.

**Keywords:** *community; food desert; just sustainability; local food network; racial awareness; social justice*

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### INTRODUCTION

The United States is considered to be one of the most developed countries in the world, yet many of its citizens still live in areas known as food deserts. Food desert

refers to a lack of access to healthy foods, but also excessive consumption of unhealthy foods. These unhealthy foods have high fat and calorie content and very low nutritional value, and are commonly known as junk or fast food. Food deserts are often associated

with food insecurity and a major cause of continued overweight or obesity, and other health problems caused by poor nutrition such as high cholesterol, diabetes, and heart disease. Uniquely, the issue of food desert in the United States has a close relationship with racism because the majority of the population living in food desert areas are black people (Kurtz, 2013, p. 249).

Ironically, this phenomenon does not afflict black residents in remote areas with minimal infrastructure, but occurs in large cities or small towns that at first glance do not appear to have infrastructure and transportation shortages such as the city of Memphis in Tennessee. In 2019, The Guardian produced a short documentary entitled “The food deserts of Memphis: inside America’s hunger capital” which referred to the city of Memphis as the “Hunger Capital in America”. The nickname alludes to the difficulty of black residents living in the south Memphis area to access the nearest supermarket. The two nearest supermarkets are 3.7 km and 4 km respectively from the residential area in South Memphis, while a third of the population living in the area does not have private transportation. A South Memphis resident would have to ask neighbors who have a car to take them to the supermarket, or take the bus for 45 minutes to an hour each way.

The root cause of food desert areas in the United States is systemic racism rooted in the slavery system and segregation policies against the black population, which resulted in lower socioeconomic conditions, education levels, and overall comparably lower quality of life compared to white residents (Williams & Collins, 2001, p. 251).

Significant differences between the living conditions of the black and white population were demonstrated in a study conducted by Lamichane *et al.* Areas where the majority of white residents live with relatively higher property values than areas where black residents live. White residents also have relatively higher levels of education and income (Lamichhane, *et.al*, 2014, p. 7). Both of these facts indicate the concentration of poverty in black areas, making it difficult to access daily needs such as healthy food (Kurtz, 2013, p. 251).

Studies on food desert often focus on systemic racism as the main cause of the formation of food desert areas, but the solutions that are often implemented only focus on the issue of access in a geographical sense, which is opening supermarkets in food desert areas. The solution to the issue of food desert should pay more attention to the systemic racism that affects living conditions, behavior, and habits that perpetuate the issue of food desert in an area such as dependence on low-nutrition foods. Difficulty accessing healthy food at affordable prices can affect consumption patterns and preferences for unhealthy foods as well as lack of knowledge about nutrition and healthy lifestyles (Corral, 2009, p. 181; Cannuscio *et al.*, 2010, p. 388).

Research shows how systemic racism has affected the economic practice of retail companies known as redlining. Supermarkets have categorized the black population as an unwanted market segmentation because of their low purchasing power and the reputation of the area where they live is considered unsafe. The practice of redlining has degraded the quality of living areas and conditions of the black population by attracting investment from the area (Kurtz,

2013; Walker, 2011; Eisenhauer, 2001; and Kwate, 2012). Systemic racism has not only affected the living conditions of the black population but has also shaped their lifestyle and behavior. Several studies discuss how the everyday environment can affect the behavior and lifestyle of the black population which has impacted their health condition (Williams and Collins, 2001; Landrine and Corral, 2009; Bader et al, 2010).

The concept of food sovereignty proposes the creation of a localized food system or network to be a long-lasting solution to food desert issues that can be adapted according to needs and involve local communities such as residents, non-profit organizations, companies, and local governments in policy planning to ensure easy access to healthy food, regardless of their race and economic and social status (Schiavoni, 2009; Sadler, *et al*, 2016; Dowler & Caraher, 2013; McCutcheon, 2011).

In South Memphis, a grassroots organization based in the area called The Works Inc. was first founded by a local priest, in collaboration with The University of Memphis, Memphis Regional Design Center, and Hyde Family Foundations its local community has created an alternative local food network in the form of a farmer's market called South Memphis Farmer's Market (SMFM) in 2009 that sells fresh produce and an all year round grocery store called The Grocer next to the market.

The market was part of a development grand plan called the South Memphis Revitalization Action Plan which uses participatory planning and resident-led visioning method. South Memphis residents were involved from the early stages of

setting priorities, inputs on the development plan and identifying the strength and weaknesses of the community that should be addressed in the planning stage. The extensive planning revealed access to healthy food was a top priority. It also identified the strength of the community was the close-knit bond between residents due to their same experiences and hardships, and community institutes like the local church (Reardon, 2018, p. 437).

The first aim of this study is to understand and analyze the design and application of solutions to the food desert issue in South Memphis through its local community using the concept of local food network (LFN) concept proposed by Sadler *et al* (2016). The second is to analyze the local initiative solutions in achieving just sustainability, using the just sustainability concept proposed by Julian Agyeman (2008). The local food network concept proposed a local food system that is focused on food security and non-commercial practices, including the local community in planning and implementation process, has the main goal of increasing quality of life and aims to strengthen social ties within the community and its local government.

Agyeman's definition of sustainability is the need to ensure an increase in the quality of life for all people, both living now and, in the future, using a fair redistribution process, without compromising attention to the protection of the surrounding environment and paying close attention to systemic issues like race and class (Agyeman, 2008, p. 753). In order to achieve this, there needs to be a close cooperative relationship between the local government and the surrounding community who share the idea of

sustainability for the environment and the people in the environment. The role of local communities is important in identifying short-term and long-term goals and implementation strategies that will be used.

The qualitative method in the form of textual analysis (Rudy & Adhitya, 2022, p. 338) in analyzing three research corpus' SMFM's and The Works Inc.'s Facebook page, a video produced by media outlet *The Guardian* uploaded on YouTube titled "The Food Deserts of Memphis: Inside America's Hunger Capital" and a research article by Carter (2021) entitled "Mapping the Influence: A Nexus Analysis Approach to Addressing Food Access". These data sources (Adhitya, Rosmawati & Fainnayla, 2022, p. 69) will provide textual and visual insights into South Memphis' food desert plight, the process of creating SMFM as a local food network in South Memphis, how it has impacted the local community and possible challenges it may face in the current future.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Interpretation of local food network (LFN) solutions by The Works Inc.**

The three corpora demonstrated The Works Inc. seeks to eradicate the issue of food desert by creating an alternative food system in the form of SMFM. The establishment of SMFM interprets the concept of LFN by utilizing the strengths of the local community in the southern city of Memphis, namely close social ties so that SMFM is not only a place for residents to access affordable fresh fruits and vegetables, but also a place to gather and bond with fellow citizens. In the long term, the focus of the market is to increase the quality of health

and well-being for its community by focusing on non-commercial practices.

### **SMFM and The Works Inc's Facebook Page**

SMFM and The Works Inc Facebook accounts show the enthusiasm of residents in the SMFM program that seeks to improve the health of the local community, by putting up information about coupon programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) and Senior Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (SMFNP) that could be used in the market, and cooking classes that demonstrate easy and affordable ways to prepare food that is liked and shared by residents. These initiatives showcase The Works Inc. understanding of the importance of creating a food pathway that ensures food security and a clear focus on health and well-being for its residents due to the involvement of the local community in the early planning stages.

Photos uploaded on the account pages also show the enthusiasm of residents in activities held in the market area like games and musical performances. Indicating SMFM playing to the strength of South Memphis' residence, and its close-knit relations. It is not only seen as a place to shop for food, but a social institution that is part of the community.

### **Carter's "Mapping the Influence: A Nexus Analysis Approach to Addressing Food Access"**

Carter (2021) identified religion, race, class and everyday shared experiences included as the foundation of SMFM as an institution. This is largely due to the early involvement of the local community in the planning stages of the market. He conducted

interaction mapping and coding of space by observing daily interactions in SMFM. Carter found a strong emotional connection amongst the market staff, The Works Inc., and the customers who are all mostly black residents from a lower-income economic background that have experienced hardship in accessing affordable healthy food (Carter, 2021, p.5). This strong bond, ultimately directed the way in which the market operates, in a warm, friendly, informal manner that mimics daily interaction in the community which has kept customers coming back to the market Carter, 2021, p. 6).

### **The Guardian's "The Food Deserts of Memphis: Inside America's Hunger Capital"**

The video largely showcased visuals that illustrate the stark difference in living conditions between South Memphis, which has a majority of black, low-income residents, and East Memphis which has a majority of white, middle to high-income residents. South Memphis has empty abandoned streets, run-down houses, liquor stores, cigarette shops and an abundance of convenient stores that sells cheap highly processed foods. While East Memphis is shown to be an upscale neighborhood with residents that owns cars and many supermarket options to shop for food.

The video captures the food desert issue in South Memphis through a racial and class awareness lens by pointing out the practice of redlining that goes back to the 1930s where black residents were refused housing loans by banks because they were deemed "high risk" compared to white residents. This practice led to the impoverishment of black neighborhoods as many businesses like

supermarkets followed suit which made accessing daily needs harder for black residents.

It also included interviews with two black female South Memphis residents that faced the same challenges of accessing healthy food in their neighborhood due to a lack of transportation and a lack of places to shop. The experience of these two women showcased how living in a food desert restricts how they make decisions regarding food, like shopping and cooking. People in these areas tend to shop for frozen and canned foods since they can only afford to go to the supermarket once or twice a month. This experience illustrates that most of the time, the food people buy is not a direct reflection of their personal preference, but rather the limitations that they faced in making these decisions. Which in the long run, will put their health at risk.

The video also included footage of a dietician in a hospital in Memphis treating black children and adults who are pre-diabetic and obese due to overconsumption of processed food before showing footage of South Memphis residents shopping at SMFM. The visual highlighted the direct need for access to healthy affordable food. Specifically, to address the challenges faced by the black low-income population in maintaining health and well-being. Indicating the importance of SMFM as a way for residents to access healthy affordable food, and in the long run, improve their quality of life.

The Works Inc's localized context of racial and class awareness has influenced the establishment of SMFM which has become part of the community in the southern city of

Memphis. The daily life experiences of the residents of the area such as transportation difficulties, long distances to supermarkets, and the high price of healthy food are part of SMFM's design as a solution to the challenges they face.

### **Local Food Network (LFN) Solutions by The Works Inc. through Just Sustainability**

The concept of just sustainability is proposed by Agyeman highlights the importance of the local community's involvement in identifying short-term and long-term objectives as well as implementation strategies of a development plan. It also stresses the importance of paying attention to factors such as institutional racism and class discrimination, especially towards marginalized communities. Lastly, it also focuses on not only a change of regulation and policy implementation, but transformative change that has a redistributive function that can truly enable a just and sustainable environment for everyone, regardless of race or class (Agyeman, 2008, p. 753).

### **The Role of Local Communities in Identifying Objectives and Implementation Strategies**

The SMFM and The Works Inc Facebook page has repeatedly posted content regarding the market's services which not only serves to help South Memphis residents' access healthy affordable food easier, but also in the long run as a platform to educate residents on how to live a healthier life overall. Indicating the institution's knowledge of the population they are serving, which is at high risk to suffer lifestyle-related

illnesses such as heart attack, diabetes, obesity and stroke.

Carter (2021) highlighted how the local culture of South Memphis very much influenced the founding of SMFM. It reflected the complexity of the food desert issue in the area, which is a mix of economic, race, class and public health concerns. By identifying the strength of the community which is its strong social ties, and its weakness, its lack of investment in the area from years of red-lining practice, it has helped to create a solution to better the health of the community by addressing that very same weakness through its own community agency and empowerment. Indicating SMFM has not only functioned to serve its community but is also dedicated to the continuity of the food system it has created that is based on social justice.

Comprehensive knowledge of the community's needs and daily life has guided SMFM in its ways of operating inclusively. Citizens preferred informal and friendly interaction between the staff, vendor and customers. Offering options of registering for events and classes by telephone, not just by text or social media, to make it easier for the growing elderly population in South Memphis to participate. Instead of forcing a foreign dish or selling them exotic produce that are unknown to the local community, the cooking classes taught participants how to make their local cuisine, like cornbread, chili, and apple crumble more healthily and affordably (Carter, 2021, p. 6).

Lastly, the Guardian's video included footage of a nutritionist in Memphis stating that community agency is far more important than individual agency, especially since the

barrier to access healthy food in South Memphis, are systemic problems that have lasted for decades. Expensive prices, lack of transport and lack of access to supermarkets indicate the need for a communal effort to eradicate food desert once and for all. SMFM is not merely an initiative to address food access only, but also rebalance the system by addressing these structural issues that have excluded marginalized people like the black low-income population in South Memphis.

### **Attention to Systemic Racism, Class and Gender Discrimination**

The Guardian's video highlighted the practice of redlining has significantly inhibited the social and economic mobility of black citizens in the United States. Visuals that illustrate the different living conditions of South and East Memphis in 2019 show the legacy redlining practice contributed to the creation of a food desert area in South Memphis.

The difference in living conditions directly relates to how citizens in these two parts of Memphis interpret the meaning of health and well-being. With limited access and resources, South Memphis residents are only able to interpret health as feeling full after a meal and surviving another day. Whereas East Memphis residents, with an abundance of resources and access to fresh healthy food, are able to have a more flexible and comprehensive interpretation, by focusing on bettering their quality of health and well-being for not only themselves, but their families. The surrounding environment of a community or built environment provides behavioral signals to individuals regarding physical activity, diet and other habits such as smoking (Landrine & Corral,

2009, p. 181). So, it is not surprising that black people in the United States have a higher risk of suffering from obesity, diabetes and heart attacks (Williams & Collins, 2001; Soro, et al, 2004).

Carter's research indicated SMFM prioritized communication with South Memphis residents as the priority for the market's design and implementation process. Creating a space to explore a marginalized community's experience and challenges, it encourages citizens to identify a bespoke solution to address their problems, while also building on the community's sense of pride and empowerment (Morales, 2011, p. 158). The combination of not only understanding the reality of their daily lives, but also hearing what they think is right for them, is the key to creating the correct public intervention to solve a particular problem, especially one that is so unique to the community like in South Memphis (Carter, 2021, p. 9).

There are some areas that SMFM could improve upon to create a more just and sustainable institution for the community of South Memphis. As a market, SMFM operates with a majority of unpaid volunteer staff, this can put pressure on The Works Inc.'s time and budget to continually be hiring and training new staff. It can also lead SMFM to be majorly reliant on external funding from the government or philanthropic foundations. The Works Inc. will need to continually monitor any regulation changes that can impact its operational funding.

Another particular issue to be paid attention to is gender. South Memphis has 41,5% single mothers (City-data, South

Memphis neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee (TN), 2019). Research shows the decision of what food to prepare and consume is influenced by the condition of the household and access to food surrounding the home (Hicks & Pennington; 2014). The operational hours of the market from 10 am-6 pm from Monday to Saturday will likely be an issue for single mothers who not only have to work long hours but take care of the house and their children. Both the video and SMFM's Facebook page showcase women are more likely to not only work but also responsible for the budget and shop for groceries, cook and prepare food for the household. Indicating the local context of just sustainability in South Memphis is also very much a gendered experience, particularly for women.

The Works Inc. will need to pay close attention by possibly providing services that could lighten the burden of single mothers, like grocery deliveries and facilitating the use of women, Infants and Children Farmer's market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP) that is currently not an acceptable form of payment at the market. Even subsidy programs that are already facilitated by SMFM like SNAP and SFMNP are not the most reliable source of financial assistance that low-income residents can rely on to access healthy fresh food at the market. SFMNP coupons at SMFM are only eligible to be used from July to August, while normally they can be used until November. Limitations like these will need to be addressed to make sure those who are at risk of food insecurity like low-income families and elderly residents are able to access food regularly.

### **Pursuing Transformative Sustainability that has a Redistributive Function**

Experts often think that the challenge for people living in food desert areas is the lack of access to healthy food and education on a healthy lifestyle. Initiatives like this do not take into account historical discourses and cultural and structural issues that have an influence on a community in navigating the food system that surrounds them. Therefore, a one-sided initiative like this often fails to improve access to healthy food in the long term (Carter, 2021, p.1). Although the discourse on healthy food is not inherently exclusive to the white population, it cannot be denied that social, economic and cultural conditions have placed the white population in an easier position than the black population, to access healthy food (Carter, 2021, p.2). Carter's research (2021) and The Guardian's video reveal the importance of paying attention to the history and structural challenges that exist within a community in shaping a more comprehensive healthy lifestyle campaign.

Community agency that was started by the founder of The Works Inc, a local priest from South Memphis and later continued by the organization he founded, focuses not only on changing policies and regulations but seeking transformative sustainability, especially for those who need more attention such as the poor who are vulnerable to hunger, namely the elderly and children as seen in several Facebook posts on SMFM and The Works Inc. account pages. According to Dutta and Basu's research (2008), transformative sustainability can be realized by understanding the reality and aspiration of health and well-being by the local community. Especially a community



that is often regarded as a passive subject by governments or organizations operating outside the scope of their local culture (Dutta and Basu, 2008, p. 561). The formation of walking groups and shared cycling groups shared on SMFM's Facebook page, is also another example of a community agency by South Memphis residents. The use of SMFM by local communities as a place to meet has formed habits that are slowly forming transformative changes, namely physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle.

Community agency in South Memphis can also be seen from the collaboration and participation of government agencies in SMFM initiatives. In one of its Facebook posts, SMFM snack-supply services for daycare centers, charter schools and offices. The supermarket operated by The Works Inc., which is located next to SMFM, The Grocer, acts as a supplier of healthy snacks to Memphis City Hall and the Shelby County Airport Authority. The concept of just sustainability put forward by Agyeman states that close collaboration between local governments and surrounding communities who both have a sustainable vision for the environment and society is an important factor to achieve true justice and sustainability. This initiative is also a good step in making transformative changes, namely changes to healthier food consumption. In the video produced by The Guardian, food options, especially snacks, are often in the form of potato chips or soda which are full of sugar and low in nutritional intake. Forming healthy eating habits by providing fresh fruit in place of less healthy options is expected to improve the health quality of local communities. The experiences of South Memphis residents in the video illustrate how living in a food

desert restricts how they make decisions regarding food, like shopping and cooking and how it ultimately affected the health and well-being of black residents in the area.

## CONCLUSION

In creating a local food network, The Works Inc. designed SMFM by addressing the issue of access to food by focusing on non-profit solutions that focused on the health and well-being of its residence, through the community's strong bond. It is not only seen as a place to shop for food, but a social institution that is part of the community. Initiatives shown in the social media account like information about chronic illness due to poor lifestyle choices, cooking classes and use of SNAP and SMFNP coupons showcase The Works Inc understanding the importance of creating a food pathway that ensures food security and a clear focus on health and well-being for its residents due to involvement of the local community in the early planning stages.

Carter (2021) identified religion, race, class and local culture included as the foundation of SMFM as an institution. A shared experience within the community can be seen in the hardship they all have experienced in accessing affordable healthy food has built, has ultimately built a strong bond. This ultimately directed the way in which the market operates, in a warm, friendly, informal manner that mimics daily interaction in the community. The Guardian video captures the food desert issue in South Memphis through a racial and class awareness lens by pointing out the practice of redlining that goes back to the 1930s. This practice led to the impoverishment of black neighborhoods as many businesses like

supermarkets followed suit by which made accessing daily needs harder for black residents. The local context of the food network created in South Memphis highlighted the importance of recognizing the systemic issues by involving local residents to identify solutions that could be maintained long-term using the community's already built-in strength and resources.

Through the lens of just sustainability, the local food network solutions in South Memphis showcased comprehensive knowledge of the community's needs and daily lives that have guided SMFM in its ways of operating inclusively. Citizens preferred informal and friendly interactions in the market, offering registration through the telephone for easier access, and cooking classes that offer familiar dishes but are made healthier as examples of the depth of knowledge SMFM has garnered in serving the community. The Guardian's video highlighted community agency is far more important than individual agency, especially since the barrier to access healthy food in South Memphis, are systemic problems that have lasted for decades. Expensive prices, lack of transport and lack of access to supermarkets indicate the need for a communal effort to eradicate food desert once and for all. SMFM is not merely an initiative to address food access only, but also rebalance the system by addressing these structural issues that has excluded marginalized people like the black low-income population in South Memphis.

In paying attention to race, class and gender discrimination the SMFM initiative showcased the importance of creating a space to explore a marginalized community's experience and challenges as it encourages

citizens to identify a bespoke solution to address their problems, while also building on the community's sense of pride and empowerment. The combination of not only understanding the reality of their daily lives, but also hearing what they think is right for them, is the key to create the correct public intervention to solve a particular problem, especially one that is so unique to the community like in South Memphis.

Carter's research (2021) and The Guardian's video reveal the importance of paying attention to the history, local culture and structural challenges that exist within a community in shaping a more comprehensive healthy lifestyle campaign. Transformative sustainability can be realized by understanding the reality and aspiration of health and well-being by the local community. In particular, understanding the different meaning of health itself in marginalized communities like South Memphis often is restricted to feeling full after a meal and surviving another day. While white upper-class residents have more flexibility in bettering their health and quality of life due to the abundance of resource and access to healthy food.

Under the concept of just sustainability, comprehensive understanding will then hopefully lead to building and strengthening community agency. In the case of South Memphis, agency can be seen from the creation of a walking and cycling group and the collaboration and participation of government agencies in SMFM initiatives. All of which has been meaningful steps towards building and maintaining a healthy way of life that can be sustained by the community. In the long run hopefully, it can increase the citizen's overall quality of life.

Some Area suggested being paid particular attention to is facilitating single mothers in South Memphis which makes up 41,5% of the population. With the limited operational hours, SMFM should consider setting up a grocery delivery service and also facilitating WIC FMNP coupons that will help lighten the financial burden of single mothers in South Memphis. SMFM currently operates with a majority of staff signed on as volunteer workers which means there is pressure on The Works Inc. to continually hire and train staff which could potentially strain the organization's time and resources. To run sufficiently The Works Inc. will also need to pay regular attention to funding sources from philanthropic organizations as well as federal and local government. Attention to regulations that could affect development program funding should also be a priority moving forward.

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