

# Cultivating Food and Nutrition Resilience Through Community Gardens

Advances in technology have revolutionised our food production and distribution systems, providing us with many conveniences when it comes to how we obtain our food.

These include widespread access to food distribution points such as supermarkets and having countless pre-packaged, pre-cooked and processed food options. These conveniences have however disconnected millions of us around the world from our food sources. Many people are unaware of where our food comes from, how it is produced, who produces it, and what inputs and efforts are required to move it to the supermarkets.

With the disruptions in the global food supply chains arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War, and the worsening impacts of climate change, challenges with food availability and affordability have served as a wakeup call, forcing countries to re-evaluate their dependence on our external food supplies. In response, many have since begun small-scale planting, subsistence farming and growing produce in kitchen gardens.

However, for individuals and households in urban areas wanting to supplement their diets and wallets by growing their own food, limited access to land or space is a major barrier to becoming a micro producer of food. Instead of trying to do it alone, a collaborative approach, such as that offered by community gardens, could facilitate greater citizen involvement in building food and nutrition resilience.

## How can 'community gardens' help improve food, nutrition, and community resilience?

A community garden is defined as "an organised, grassroots initiative whereby a section of land is used to produce food or flowers or both in an urban environment for the personal use or collective benefit of its members."<sup>1</sup> Self-organisation and self-direction are central to the community garden approach. Volunteers collaborate to convert unused and often dilapidated public spaces to productive uses such as growing fresh food.

The concept of community gardening is not new. However, with the increasing recognition of socioeconomic phenomena such as 'food deserts', community gardens have been dusted-off and relooked by policymakers, municipal authorities, and researchers as a viable alternative for solving urban food shortages and nutrition challenges.

Food deserts can be described as geographic areas where residents' access to affordable, healthy food options (especially fresh fruits and vegetables) is restricted or non-existent due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient traveling distance.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to providing a source of affordable, healthy, fresh food, community gardens often serve several purposes. Research into the model has found that community gardens often provide a source of pride to its participants, and functions as a focal point to galvanise community-led action on pressing issues such as youth unemployment, education, the empowerment of girls and women, and health and wellness.



TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

Social and Economic	Environmental	Health and Wellness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased economic activity from the local businesses that engage in urban agriculture that generate employment, provide skills and job training, and generate ancillary businesses such as markets, restaurants and food processing.</li> <li>Community gardens have been correlated with reduction in crime, and upliftment of urban areas where citizens take pride in developing and maintaining their gardens.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community gardens that are managed sustainably can help reduce pollution and environmental degradation associated with pesticides, fertilisers and field tillage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On the individual family unit level, especially for low-income families, they provide access to lower cost, more nutritious food, and can help reduce food bills, improve diets and overall health and wellness.</li> </ul>

Source: Haletky, N., Taylor, O., Weidner, J., & Gerbing, S. (2006). Urban agriculture as a solution to food insecurity: West Oakland and People's Grocery. *Urban Action*, 49, 49-57.

The presence of community gardens also strongly correlates with reduced levels of crime. Dilapidated sections of cities can become revitalised by the presence of these green spaces. In instances where community gardening happens on a commercial scale - usually through the vehicle of a co-operative society - they often boost local economic activity in low-income communities by providing jobs and generating spin-off products and services.

## The potential of community gardens in Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago has an opportunity to use community gardens as a tool to tackle food and

nutrition security. Several non-governmental and community-based organisations such as 'Why Farm' and the 'Sunbeam Foundation' are pioneering in this space.

However, to achieve greater impact of scale, more abandoned, unused, or underutilised public spaces in communities could be transformed into productive micro-hubs of activity to grow more nutritious food. This also requires the involvement and support of the private and public sectors to assist community residents in accessing lands, technical knowledge, and funding to establish sustainable community gardens.

<sup>1</sup> Corrigan, M. P. (2011). Growing what you eat: Developing community gardens in Baltimore, Maryland. *Applied Geography*, 31(4), 1232-1241.

<sup>2</sup> <https://foodispower.org/access-health/food-deserts/>



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