

Food Justice: Self-Directed Solutions

Community Gardens, Food Cooperatives, CSAs

Objectives:

1. To understand types of self-directed solutions toward addressing food justice
2. To examine models of self-directed solutions

Models of Self-Directed Food Justice Programs:

- **Community Gardens**
- **Food Cooperatives (Co-ops)**
- **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Programs**

Community Gardens

Community gardens are plots of land that are rented by individuals or groups for private gardens or are for the benefit of the people caring for the garden.

Community gardens are about more than just growing food. By increasing the number of local community gardeners and available garden space, families and individuals are able to grow fresh, healthy produce for very little money, green previously underused areas, increase local food security, get to know and interact with their neighbours, and work together to enhance the communities where they live.

Community Garden case study:

CATA: <https://www.cata-farmworkers.org/food-justice>

CATA - The Farmworkers Support Committee is a non-profit organization founded by migrant farm workers in New Jersey in 1979. CATA is a grassroots, membership-based organization working with farm workers and the Latino immigrant community in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. CATA's work focuses on workers' rights, health and safety in the workplace, immigrant's rights, and food justice.

Originally founded by Puerto Rican farm workers in the area, its constituents in the state's agricultural regions are primarily Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Puerto Rican. The organization is headquartered in Glassboro and works in six different agricultural counties in New Jersey; its efforts also extend out of state, to workers in southeast Pennsylvania's mushroom-growing operations (where the group supports another farm worker-run community garden) and Maryland's large chicken-processing plants. The organizers and board of directors are farm workers themselves.

CATA organizers visit workers' housing, which is often provided by farm owners but frequently falls short of federal and state standards, to run workshops on topics like workplace health and safety (such as the dangers of pesticide exposure or heat stress), workers' rights and health issues, including HIV and STD prevention. During these sessions, farmworkers learn what labor violations look like, so they know when they're being improperly treated.

Some farm owners, even those who meet the lax legal minimums for farm worker treatment, are often uninterested in or hostile toward the idea of cooperating with CATA—even when it might save them time and money. For example, the organization’s Train the Trainer program, which CATA developed in collaboration with the Farmworker Association of Florida and the Border Agricultural Workers’ Project, has taught farm workers to train others to conduct pesticide-safety training for the past decade. Farm owners are required by the federal government to train their workers in safe pesticide handling. In 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency, which sets standards and regulations for pesticide safety, revised these standards for the first time in two decades—requiring stricter practices, like training workers on pesticide handling every year instead of every five years. CATA sent letters to farm owners, as they have done in the past, offering to hold free training for them. As usual, there were no takers.¹

CATA is also a founding member of the [Agricultural Justice Project](#) and helped to create the Food Justice Certification, a set of high-bar standards that when met create a just and fair food system for all.

Read more about CATA’s Community Garden:

- **Community Garden Cultivates Organic Produce for Bridgeton’s Farm workers**
<https://ediblejersey.ediblecommunities.com/food-thought/community-garden-cultivates-organic-produce-bridgetons-farmworkers>
- **CATA creates new community garden in Salisbury**
<https://www.wmdt.com/2017/07/cata-creates-new-community-garden-in-salisbury/>
- **CATA’s Community Gardens:**
<https://www.cata-farmworkers.org/food-justice>

Food Cooperatives (Co-ops)

A food cooperative, or food co-op, is a food distribution outlet or farm organized as a cooperative, rather than a private or public company. Food cooperatives are where the decisions regarding the production and distribution of its food are chosen by its members. Unlike corporate chains, food co-ops are totally independent and owned by the community members who shop (consumer cooperatives) or farm (worker cooperatives) there. Instead of focusing on investors, food co-ops can focus on their community — nourishing everyone according to their budget and cooking style.

Most farm worker co-ops practice *agroecology*, the science behind sustainable agriculture, from the ground up. It encourages democratic, decentralized decision-making by farmers and incorporates practical, low cost, and ecology-based technologies for productive farming. Not only do agro-ecological farming methods strengthen ecological and economic resilience in the face of today’s climate, water and energy crises, they offer a path forward for growing food to feed us all.²

Food co-op case study:

Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad, Familias Unidas por la Justicia: <http://familiasunidasjusticia.org/en/home/>

“To tell the truth, we are forming this cooperative so that one day we can get ahead. Hopefully this goes well. For now, in the context we are fighting — si se puede! — we have each other as partners willing to work together as much as possible, so that we all move forward. In this cooperative, there are no bosses nor supervisors. We arrive at the hour that we’re able to, and we apply ourselves and do our best work.” — *Modesto Hernandez*

“For years, four farm workers and labor union organizers endured exposure to pesticides, low pay, and abusive situations while working on an industrial berry farm in Washington State. To remedy this situation, they decided to form an agricultural

¹ <https://ediblejersey.ediblecommunities.com/food-thought/community-garden-cultivates-organic-produce-bridgetons-farmworkers>

² <https://www.foodjustice.org/food-justice>

cooperative, enabling them to own their own land and to determine their own working conditions. With the support of the nonprofit [Community to Community](#), they now own 22 acres of land on which they cultivate blueberries and strawberries that supply local demand for ethically-grown organic fruit. The cooperative's founders now aim to support the development of other cooperatives in the area and to encourage a local solidarity economy."³

"The four founding members of *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad* see their co-op, officially launched in 2017, as a parallel project — another option — to the union contract. They farm as a cooperative on two leased acres in Sedro Woolley and two leased acres in Lynden, Washington. They're growing strawberries and blueberries, selling to individuals who supported their organizing campaign to form FUJ and at churches."⁴

With help from a local advocacy group, *Community to Community Development*, their vision became a reality. *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad, the Land and Liberty Cooperative*, is a farm worker owned cooperative. They took matters into their own hands to bring power back to the people.⁵

"The co-op members also have a vision to support their local community, to plant and sell locally and to create a cooperative chain so each co-op formed maintains and supports a connection to the previous ones. They envision a local solidarity economy. For example, *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad* will grow the corn for the tortillas that will be made by a tortilleria co-op that is planned for the future."⁶

Read more about *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad*:

- **'No supervisors, no boss': Upending farm labor by owning the land**
Tired of mistreatment and not being able to afford the food they harvested, two Bellingham farm workers left corporate agriculture to start their own berry cooperative.
<https://crosscut.com/focus/2020/02/no-supervisors-no-boss-upending-farm-labor-owning-land>
- **Be your own boss, a day with *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad***
<https://medium.com/@estherychong/be-your-own-boss-cooperativa-tierra-y-libertad-155827dee688>
- **Berry Farmers Break Free From Big Agriculture**
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/democracy/2018/08/29/berry-farmers-break-free-from-big-agriculture>
- **Report-back: Field Trip to *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad*, July 2021**
<https://cagi.org/2021/07/report-back-field-trip-to-cooperativa-tierra-y-libertad/>

Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)

Most CSAs do not come from worker-owned farms, but buying local is one way to opt-out of the industrial farming system. As the owners/operators are usually present for CSA pickups or at farmer's markets, there is opportunity to ask about their labor practices as well.

A CSA commonly refers to a group whose members receive weekly shares of food from a certain farm (or groups of farms) in their region. Each member is supporting their local agriculture, essentially, not through a retailer or market but directly, and at pop-up community locations to serve the pickup times such as schools, parks, or churches.

³ <https://www.localfutures.org/programs/global-to-local/planet-local/food-farming-fisheries/cooperativa-tierra-y-libertad/>

⁴ <https://ussen.org/2018/08/06/cooperativa-tierra-y-libertad/>

⁵ <https://medium.com/@estherychong/be-your-own-boss-cooperativa-tierra-y-libertad-155827dee688>

⁶ <https://ussen.org/2018/08/06/cooperativa-tierra-y-libertad/>

Most CSA groups receive all their produce from one farm, with often an option to buy additional shares for eggs, meat, fruit or cheese, all from one farm to each category. This gives you a window into a typical growing season for a small, often family-run farm business. Many CSAs will organize a group trip to visit their principal farm, and you'll often get to meet the farm's staff during pickup. But moreover, your contribution means a lot to the farm's financial security, which can be so fragile and vulnerable to chance (weather conditions, slow days at the farmers market, etc.). By paying up front, you're ensuring sales throughout the season.⁷

Farm worker-owned CSA case study:

Catalan Farm: <https://www.catalanfarm.com/>

Catalan Farm is a rare example of a farm worker-owned farm. One of their sources of income is through their CSA program, available for delivery in Hollister, Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, and Palo Alto, CA. Each box, ideal for a family of 4, is filled with 12-13 varieties of seasonal, local, and organic produce grown in Hollister, CA. All produce is CCOF certified. Produce is also available for purchase in bulk for restaurants and markets in the above areas.

"For Maria Catalán, stewarding land is ancestral. Her grandfather was a successful farmer and cattle rancher from Guerrero, Mexico, and migrated to Texas under the Bracero Program in the 1960s. Maria moved to Salinas Valley, California, when she was 25 years old with four children, farm work experience, and a future of opportunity waiting to be harvested.

For the next seven years, Maria worked as a field laborer for large-scale vegetable farms and lived the gruesome reality of industrial agriculture's demand and dehumanization. In 1994, Maria's career took a turn when she was invited to a 6-year organic farm training program at the Rural Development Center in Salinas. "I decided to commit to the education program out of my curiosity of organic farming. This was how my ancestors farmed and I wanted to continue that tradition."

Maria is an activist fighting for migrant worker's rights and the development of an equitable food system where access to fresh produce should be a right, not a privilege. She worked with a non-profit group called PODER (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights) to deliver CSA shares to marginalized communities in San Francisco's Mission District. Her CSA programs have also collaborated with schools, churches, and homeless garden projects in Santa Cruz to feed her community and spread the bounty of fresh produce.

Maria also founded her own non-profit, Pequeños Agricultores en California (PAC), to help migrant farmers acquire their organic certification and assist farmers when applying for grants and loans for owning their own land. "This is my life mission. To feed my family and my community while helping bridge the gap of an unequal food system."

Maria Catalán was awarded national recognition from the USDA for her organic farm and community outreach programs. In 2008 Maria Catalán was honored by the Center for Latino Farmers for "her tireless work in advocating for organic farming and assisting limited resource producers using her own funds."

Maria is currently farming on 15 acres in Hollister, CA with her family. She hopes to expand her farm acreage, incorporate more regenerative practices, and incorporate her non profit, PAC.

Read more about *Catalan Farm*:

Meet A Farmer: Maria Catalán

<https://farmersfootprint.us/maria-catalan-english/>

⁷ <https://www.seriousseats.com/should-you-join-a-csa-what-is-a-community-supported-agriculture-pros-and-cons>

Reflection questions:

1. How does your congregation use the outdoor portion of it's property? Could farming be done there? Why or why not?
2. Are there spaces in your city/small town that could be utilized for community gardening? What would it take to address this in your community?
3. Are there small farms in your area? How can you create partnerships and build support for them? Can you work to build farm to table relationships with local schools, hospitals, restaurants, grocery stores, etc.?

Action Ideas:

1. Does your congregation own property that could be used as a community garden for low income people in your area? While it might circumvent attractive landscaping options, it could create a lifeline for people in the community who are struggling to feed their families and provide an opportunity for relationships among congregation members and people who could use some help. If you are in a rural community where farming means that there are migrant workers in the area, consider specifically inviting folks from the farm labor camps to utilize the property for planting, cultivating, and harvesting culturally appropriate food. Keep in mind that you may need to coordinate transportation to and from the camps. You might celebrate the project by having a fellowship dinner where farm workers could share their traditional dishes made with produce they harvested.
2. If there is a local CSA farm, can your congregation promote shares and be a location for delivering weekly/monthly produce?

Learn More:

Farm workers are climbing up the organic food chain

A number of migrant workers are no longer making pennies per bucket picked but working for themselves, running CSAs, and bringing new blood into American farming.

<http://www.grist.org/article/food-2011-01-28-farmworkers-are-climbing-up-the-organic-food-chain>

Community gardens help Florida farm workers put food on the table

<https://www.clickorlando.com/news/2019/10/31/community-gardens-help-florida-farm-workers-put-food-on-the-table>

Prayer:

God of building and property, trees and flowers, may we consider all our land as Your gift to us.

Help us assess whether landscaping overshadows the possibility of cultivating

friends and fruit,
needs and nuts,
potential and produce,
vision and vegetables

by using the soil around our structures

to share with those who can plant and cultivate and harvest food

they would otherwise not be able to afford.

Give us faith to see the possibilities of extending our hospitality beyond the inner walls in our houses of worship

to extend our welcome to those who offer their hands and bodies to feed us

as we seek to be stewards of all we possess.

May we open our hearts to how you would guide us.

Amen.