

Urban Food Co-op Tackles Economic Empowerment

By Dana Harvey

The green jobs conversation most often centers on industrialized sectors that require millions of dollars in capital—from high-tech clean energy to biodiesel. However, the world's basic natural resources—land, water, and farming—are the essential building blocks for combating climate change and can provide immediate avenues to build an equitable green economy. Sustainable agriculture, urban food production, and environmentally sound distribution systems provide opportunity for economic revitalization through true local ownership. Urban planning and policy in the United States should embrace locally-owned sustainable food enterprises as essential to all economic development efforts.

Mandela MarketPlace is a leader in development, application, and assessment of food systems. The organization evolved over the last eight years, first as a project of the Environmental Justice Institute and Tides Center, and then as a nonprofit in 2006 with a mission to strengthen community health, integrity, and identity by providing economic opportunity and empowerment for inner-city Oakland residents and businesses, and local family farms. “We support our community by providing healthy, locally grown produce and educating them about organic and pesticide free food,” says Yuro Chavez, West Oakland Youth Standing Empowered (WYSE) team member and Mandela Food Cooperative worker-owner.

West Oakland is a dynamic community that experiences disproportionate burdens of environmental pollution, social and racial discrimination, economic disenfranchisement, and health disparity gaps. Residents rally, work, organize, and protest in order to improve equity and quality of life for themselves,



families, and neighbors. When the Cypress Freeway fell in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, residents organized to re-route the freeway around the residential areas and lobbied for job training and local hiring on the reconstruction efforts. When Red Star Yeast was spewing acetaldehyde into the community, residents spent over 15 years working to clean it up or shut it down. They were finally successful in removing the third largest air polluter in California from their community. Even with such a vital and vocal residential base, West Oakland continues to battle ever-increasing disparities especially, when it comes to their health and wealth.

Mandela MarketPlace, which works directly with low-income Oakland community residents, local, state and federal agencies, nonprofits, small business owners, and minority farmers to meet food needs and create economic opportunities is part of a growing movement that considers the environmental and socio-physical impacts of farming.

“Sustainable agriculture and organic and diverse

Photo:

Leroy Musgraves and Khalil Harvey at Musgraves' farm in Livingstone, California. Musgraves is a farmer and nutrition educator with Mandela MarketPlace.

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urban food production hold the key to local economic revitalization and job creation, while drastically reducing our society's energy consumption that sends food thousands of miles from farmer to plate. Using grassroots organizing principles and permaculture design, it's possible to train and pay people to produce food safely and sustainably where they live, with minimal capital and infrastructure."¹

The Cooperative Approach

From an idea born of community health assessments, Mandela Foods Cooperative (MFC) is the result of a unique community collaboration responding to food security concerns. A recurring theme throughout the process of community meetings and surveys was the need for individual economic empowerment, and the cooperative opened in June of 2009 in response.

Serving 300-400 customers daily, the 2,500 square foot co-op is retaining revenue in the local economy that exceeds its sales projections while providing eight resident worker-owners with income, long-term asset-building, and extensive training as community health educators.



At the store, eight local worker-owners are personally invested in the successful operation of a well-stocked grocery venue dedicated to improving the nutritional behaviors of their families, friends and neighbors. With support from Mandela Marketplace, these social entrepreneurs are developing a nutrition education curriculum, establishing relevant daily in-store tastings and cooking demonstrations, and creating meaningful relationships with customers that will lead to healthy changes in their lives.

"Everyone who has gone through [Mandela Foods] walks away knowing its importance and holding respect for healthy food and community," says community activist Monica Monterroso.

Sustainable Agriculture and Distribution

Farms are important stakeholders in the global climate picture. Locally based sustainable agriculture will reduce the green house gas emissions involved in planting, harvesting and transporting crops.

"The most efficient way to reduce air pollution from farms is to reduce the size and increase the number of farms. In other words, many small farms scattered throughout the country will have less of an impact on air quality than conventional factory farms do. Sustainable livestock farms depend less on cheap feed and fuel-guzzling machinery, because natural pasture systems rely on the animal's own energy to harvest feed and spread manure. Because



of this, sustainable farming offers a viable opportunity to reduce farm-related air pollution. As consumers, we can use our economic power to support farms that supply sustainably-produced fruits and vegetables, meat, eggs, and dairy products.”²

“As long as we’re buying produce from other countries and other parts of the United States, we are subject to the costs of shipping, fuel-consuming boats and cars, and pesticides,” says James Berk, a MFC worker-owner. “It’s in our best interest to buy locally and support sustainable growing practices, and that is what we are doing through Mandela MarketPlace.”

Across the nation, primary root causes of urban food insecurity are poverty and inequitable distribution. In the small and sustainable farming sector, farmers face increasing pressure from agribusiness and large producers who garner 60 percent of agricultural subsidies and undercut small farmers’ ability to make a living. Large-scale farming practices not only put farmers at risk but are stressing the environment, contributing to global warming, and perpetuating food instability.

Full Spectrum Community Involvement

In addition to the Mandela Foods Cooperative, Mandela MarketPlace supports the young members of WYSE in building the foundations for a just and sustainable Oakland. These youth are on the streets learning the importance of transportation, environmental justice, public health, and economic empowerment through action. Their projects include WYSE Streets, Healthy Neighborhood Stores Alliance, and the Burbank Garden.

In partnership with Alameda County Public Health, WYSE members collected over 300 surveys for a CALTRANS Environmental Justice Transportation Planning project. They formed an alliance with Urban Habitat to advocate and pass Measure VV to maintain affordable fares for AC Transit riders through direct lobbying of local officials. WYSE has facilitated new crosswalks, stoplights, trash containers, and improvements to local parks and public spaces. They have studied the conditions of parks and the



prevalent advertising messages of fast food chains on billboards, particularly within 1,000 feet of schools. Recently, the WYSE team surveyed 28 neighborhood stores and their environmental conditions. WYSE campaigns for healthier product selections in corner stores near McClymonds High School.

Moving forward with the Healthy Neighborhood Stores Alliance, WYSE is developing a national model for increasing access to healthy and affordable foods, while supporting minority and disadvantaged farmers from the local area. Their next undertaking is to open a corner store produce service business.

Using the Mandela MarketPlace model, it’s possible to shift the social and environmental conditions that gave rise to the ecological disparities and challenges faced by inner-city communities across the United States. Working from a systems view and making these connections between public health, urban and rural environmental health, and economic development creates a shift in social conditions that have allowed the disparities and challenges faced by inner-city communities—starting from the ground up. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Raders, Gavin and Zandi, Haleh. “Planting Justice: Create Green Jobs.” October 2009. <http://www.plantingjustice.org/programs/create-green-jobs>
- 2 Lappé, Anna. “The Climate Crisis at the End of Your Fork.” Sustainable Table. October 2009. <http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/climatechange/#fn1>

Photo:

West Oakland Youth Standing Empowered (WYSE) choose plants for their parks project.

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Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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(Inside Front) Richmond refinery. ©2008 Scott Braley. (Inside Back) Urban garden in Havana Cuba. © John and Faith Morgan / www.powerofcommunity.com.

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