



Community Land Trusts as a Tool to Reclaim the Commons, Promote Food Sovereignty, and Foster Community Resilience

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Problem:

Land and Food Injustice in the United States

Private property rights are foundational to the US legal and political system, where **land ownership is inextricably intertwined with power**. Access to land has been and continues to be **deeply unequal**, shaped by exclusionary land use policies reinforcing broader patterns of social and economic inequality. Land is treated as a commodity, concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority. This dynamic **undermines collective ability to steward land for public benefit**.



Historically, land was a **communal resource**, supporting both subsistence and social cohesion. However, industrialization and globalization have **disrupted these relationships**, replacing them with unsustainable, extractive land use practices.

This unsustainable dynamic is evidenced in our food system, where land access is essential for production. The COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating climate crisis have exposed **vulnerabilities in global supply chains**. Millions of Americans live in food deserts and/or in food insecurity (USDA 2025).

The resulting socio-ecological crises underscore the **urgent need to reconceptualize land not as a commodity, but as a finite and essential common good**. A transformative approach to land governance - one that prioritizes **ecological integrity and equitable ownership** - is imperative for fostering resilient communities and addressing entrenched injustices.

Proposed Solution:

Reclaiming the Public Commons and Growing Resilience through Shared Land and Community-Based Agriculture

Reclaiming land is the first step toward **reclaiming power**.

In a system where land ownership dictates access to resources, political influence, and economic opportunity, communities must assert control over land to build autonomy and resilience.

But once land is reclaimed, the question becomes: what should we do with it? How do we build resilience?

I propose reclaiming ‘the commons’ through community-based land tenure. Specifically, I argue that **community land trusts, combined with community-based agriculture, can create vital pathways toward food and land sovereignty grounded in greater community resilience**. This approach challenges dominant land use patterns by centering collective ownership and management, grassroots governance, and local food production as tools for broader systemic transformation.

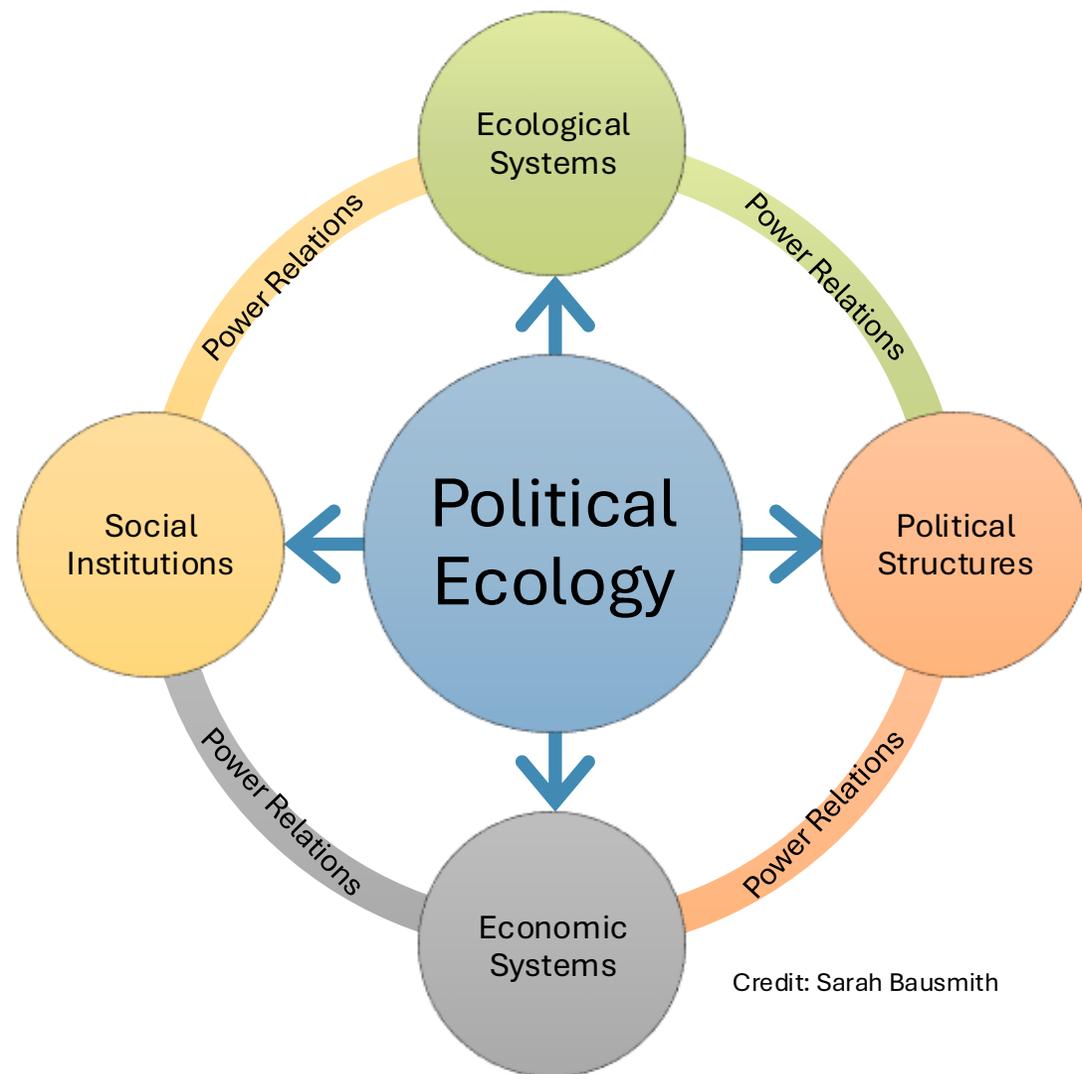
"Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality."

Malcolm X, 1963

Message to the Grassroots

Through this lens, I explore how alternative land use systems can serve as tools for **systemic transformation**. Drawing on literature across the fields of **political ecology, food systems, and land reform**, I analyze the potential of CLTs to collectivize land and how, when paired with CBA, they can foster more equitable, sustainable, and self-determined communities.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding This Issue: Political Ecology and Food Sovereignty



Political ecology theory provides a critical lens for understanding how our **shared environment** is governed, emphasizing the **place-based interconnectedness** of social and ecological inequalities which must be addressed through collaborative efforts (Moragues-Faus & Marsden 2017).

Access to and control over resources such as land and food are **deeply political**, shaped by **power relations, historical inequalities, and economic systems**.

Food sovereignty emphasizes the right of people to **define their own food systems**, prioritizing “healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods” (Nyéléni Declaration 2007).

PILLARS OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems

1

FOCUSES ON FOOD FOR PEOPLE

- Right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food
- Food is not a “commodity”

2

VALUES FOOD PROVIDERS

- Supports sustainable livelihoods
- Respects the work of all food providers (women, farmworkers, pastoralists, fishers, forest dwellers, Indigenous peoples)

3

LOCALIZES FOOD SYSTEMS

- Reduces distance between food providers and consumers
- Puts providers and consumers at the centre of decision making on food issues

4

PUTS CONTROL LOCALLY

- Ensures the rights of local communities to inhabit and use their territories
- Rejects land grabbing and the privatization of natural resources

5

BUILDS KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

- Respects traditional and Indigenous knowledge
- Participatory and decolonial research methods
- Appropriate technology and data sovereignty

6

WORKS WITH NATURE

- Diverse, low-external input agroecological systems provide important ecosystem functions, and support resilience and adaptation to climate change

Defining Key Concepts...

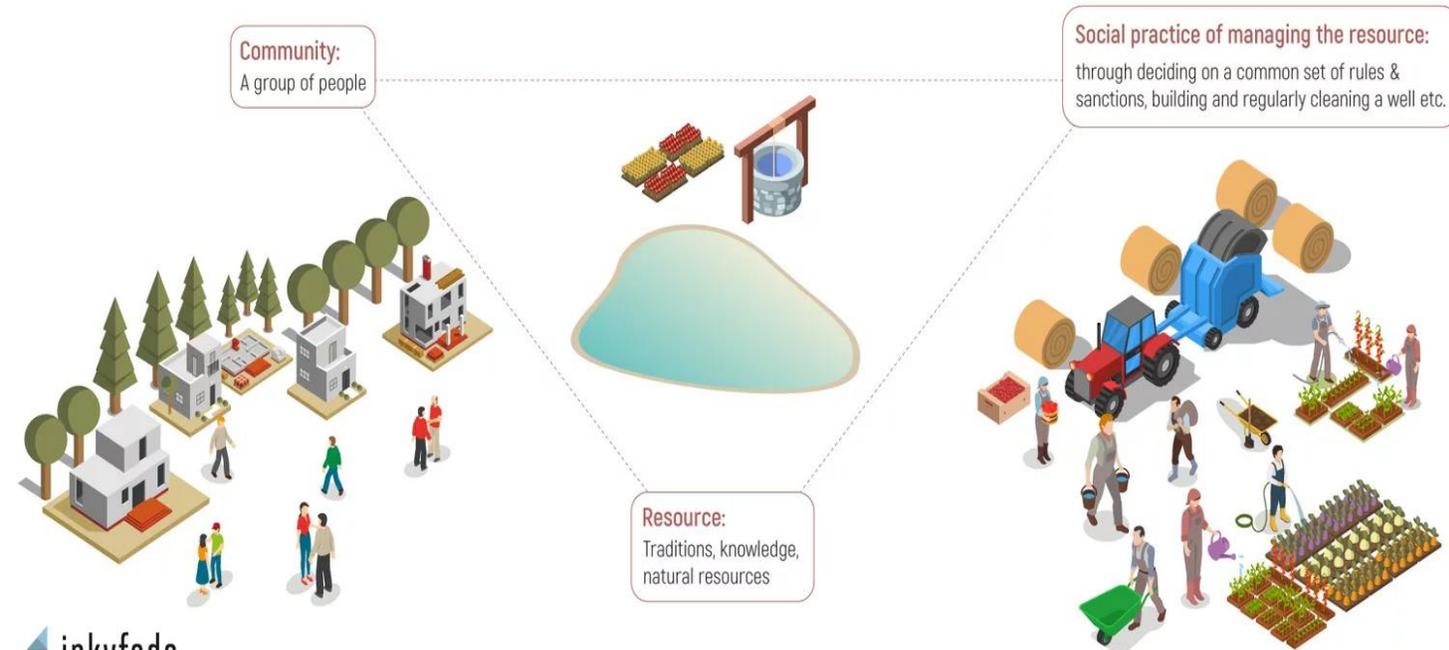
The Commons

More than a static concept, the commons are a **process** that “vests **all property in the community** and organizes labor for the **common benefit of all.**”

“There is no commons without **commoning.**”

- Linebaugh, 2009

A commons = a social system → enables people to meet their shared needs



The ‘Tragedy of the Commons’

Individuals, acting in their own **self-interest**, will **overuse and inevitably deplete** shared resources.

Belief in the inevitability of this scenario has that been used to **justify** the expansion of **private property regimes** and **discourage** support for **communally managed lands.**

This has led to policies that favor **market-based solutions over community-led management**, ignoring successful examples of collective stewardship.

This theory is a fallacy! It describes an open access regime without shared rules and responsibilities - that is not a commons.

Communities **can and do** manage shared resources sustainably through collective governance, norms, and local institutions (Ostrom 1990). In fact, when communities feel a **greater sense of ownership, trust, and shared responsibility**, they are often more effective stewards of common resources than distant regulators or private owners driven by profit.

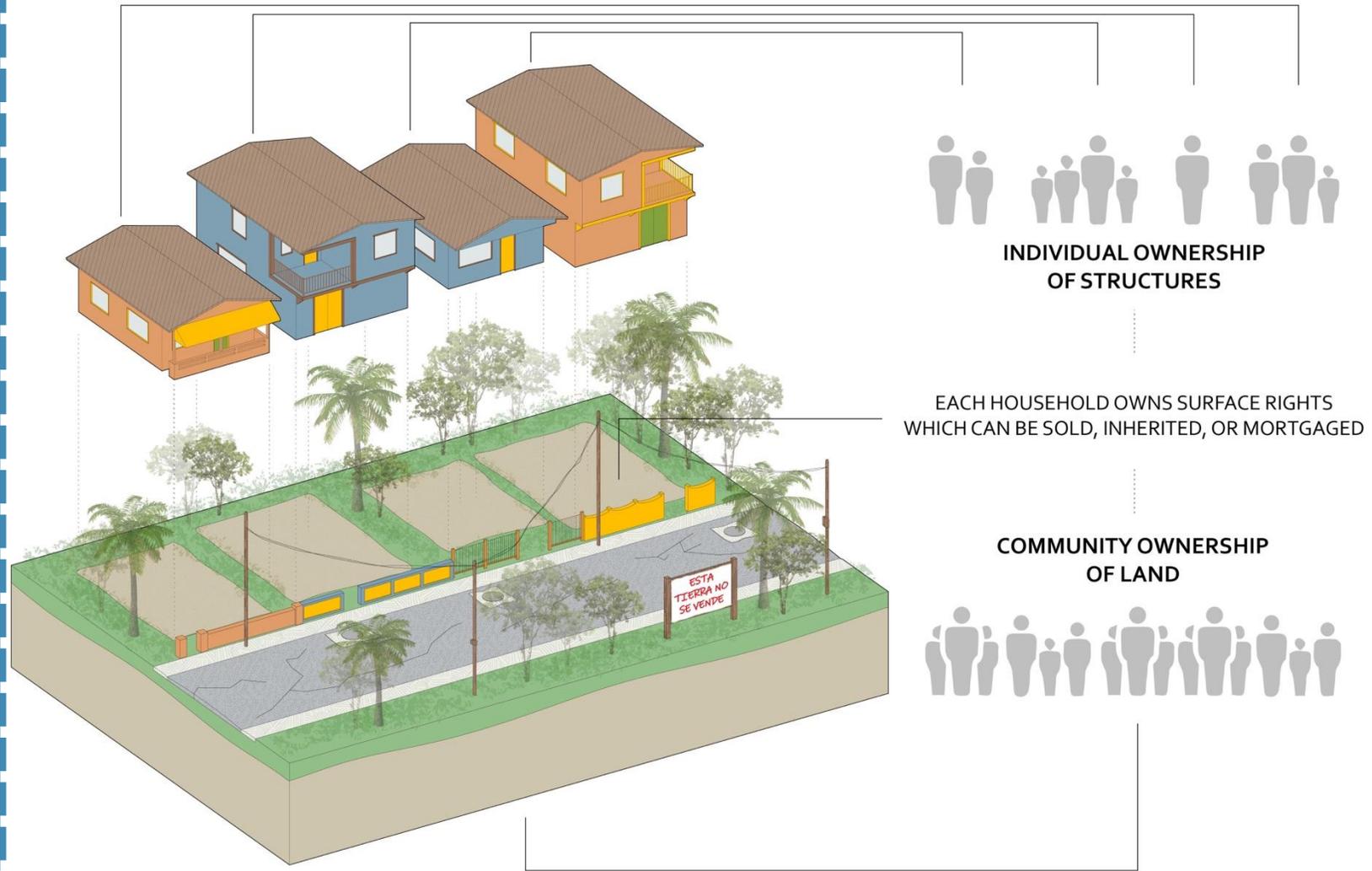
Source: Pesavento, Alice. “What are ‘Commons’?” Heinrich Boll Stiftung. March 3, 2023. <https://tn.boell.org/en/2023/03/08/quest-ce-que-les-communs>

Defining Key Concepts...

Community Land Trust

A community land trust (CLT) is a model of **cooperative land tenure** that aims to “secure property and power for people with too little of either” (Davis 2014: 26).

In a CLT, a **non-profit buys land** and holds it in perpetuity with a long-term commitment to stewardship. That land is **leased back to the community**, creating a lower barrier to entry than buying land outright and ensuring affordability. The land trust is **governed** by a board of democratically-elected community members.



Literature Review

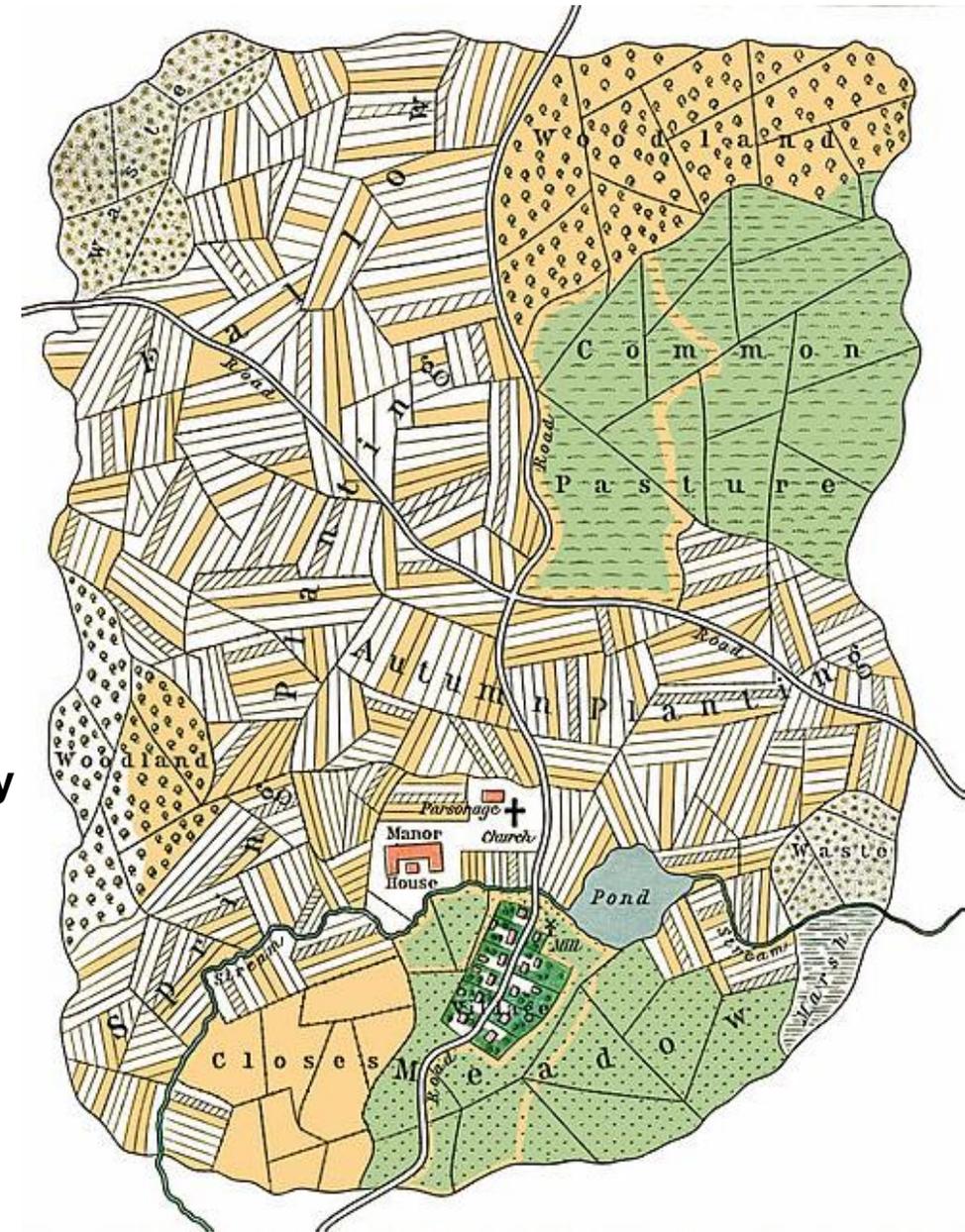
Land 'Commoning' and Community Land Trusts

CLTs remove land from the speculative market and put it back into the hands of community members, thus preventing displacement.

Davis (2014) traces the history of the CLT model in the United States from its roots in the **Civil Rights Movement** and attributes the growth of this model to grassroots activism, support from philanthropic organizations, and the adaptation of the model to urban settings.

'**Land commoning**' is defined as the shifting **away from** individualized, speculative land ownership models focused on profit and **toward** collective governance approach to managing land resources (Wach & Hall 2024). CLTs function as a tool of 'commoning' by transforming land from a commodity into a **collectively managed resource** (Caldwell et. al 2019).

Common land and shared resources foster a sense of **mutual responsibility** and **interdependence**, cultivating **social cohesion** and ecological care that are often absent in privatized systems.



Source: Wikipedia. "Medieval Open Field System." Accessed June 4, 2025.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Medieval_Open_Field_System.JPG

Literature Review

CLTs: Radical or Reformist?

While CLTs often engage in affirmative politics, they do not **inherently** challenge structural issues. Wach & Hall (2024) highlight tensions between land commoning and other strategies for racial justice and agroecology, noting that individualized property relations can sometimes limit the effectiveness of commoning. Nevertheless, CLTs do provide **opportunities for radical transformation** (DeFilippis et al. 2019; Caldwell et al. 2019).



‘Commoning’ is not just about managing shared resources but also about **learning new ways of relating to land, community, and governance** in pursuit of a more just and equitable future. In this way, ‘commoning’ through CLTs can be a **politicizing force** on communities, a way to shift their perspectives away from ingrained concepts of private property and towards a more community-oriented future (Caldwell et al. 2019; DeFilippis et al. 2019). Moreover, CLTs **subvert traditional power hierarchies** through the community control of land (DeFilippis et al. 2019).

Scholars (Calo et al. 2024; Owley & Lewist 2014) suggest ways that alternative forms of land use, such as land trusts, conservation easements, and other quasi-market reforms can use municipal power to unlock land. Roman-Alcalá (2024) discusses further solutions which align with what CLTs offer: **building coalitions** among diverse stakeholders, **unlearning** ingrained beliefs about the primacy of private property, **relearning** connection to the land and community, and **mobilizing at the grassroots** level to challenge existing power structures and promote equitable land distribution.

Literature Review

Property Regimes and Food Systems

The majority of CLTs currently emphasize housing. However, Rosenberg and Yuen (2012) argue that the CLT movement can grow even stronger by **expanding beyond a residential focus, especially in support of urban agriculture**. Wach & Hall (2024) discuss how land commoning efforts offer opportunities for aligning food systems with more equitable and sustainable practices such as agroecology.

In the Global North, **entrenched frameworks of private property** and broader neoliberal policies **limit the potential** for sustainable food system transformations (Calo et al. 2024; Roman-Alcalá 2024; Clendenning & Dressler 2013; Owley & Lewist 2014). **Precarious land tenure** hinders urban agriculture development (Owley & Lewist 2014) and disparities in secure access to land among can **exacerbate food injustice** (Horst et al. 2024; Wekerle & Classens 2015).

Transformation of land relations are a **prerequisite** to food system transformation (Calo et al., 2024; Roman-Alcalá, 2024). But land reform movements in the United States have faced **political, economic, ideological, and organizational barriers** in the form of anticommunist land politics, the dominance of large agribusiness interests, and a lack of political will (Roman-Alcalá 2024).

Moragues-Faus & Marsden (2017) discuss the need to integrate political ecology theory into agri-food scholarship, arguing for a more critical analysis that explicitly incorporates political ecology perspectives to address food insecurities and **system unsustainability**. Urban agriculture is a critical **'space of possibility'** at the **nexus of environmental and socioeconomic issues**.



Source: Lewis, Trinity. "Judge strikes down a part of the rule." Tri-State Livestock News. December 21, 201. <https://www.tsln.com/news/federal-judge-strikes-down-wyoming-data-trespass-law/>

Literature Review

Changing Food Systems Through Community-Based Agriculture

Community-based agriculture (CBA) challenges **traditional notions of land use and property relations** by empowering local communities to **establish control over local land and food systems** (Wekerle & Classens 2015). Alternative community-based forms of agriculture such as urban agriculture (UA) can **heal the disconnect** between people and their food sources, the **commodification** of land, and the **alienation** caused by industrial agriculture (McClintock, 2010).

UA and CBA **rescale** food production, **reclaim** vacant land for productive use, and **restore** ecological balance by integrating food production into urban environments (McClintock 2010). They also provide **broader social benefits**, fostering community connection and social cohesion, providing opportunities for skill building, reconnecting people with their local ecosystem, and promoting collective stewardship of urban spaces (McClintock 2010).



Source: Yu, Alan. "Black farmers work to cultivate diversity." WHY. October 19, 2017. <https://why.org/segments/black-farmers-work-to-cultivate-diversity/>

These practices are associated with **positive physical and mental health impacts** due to increased time in green spaces, direct access to fresh food, and improved social bonds (Horst et al. 2024). UA should be prioritized in long-term planning efforts, coalition-building, and targeted investments to marginalized communities, increasing the amount of land permanently available for urban agriculture and addressing the threats of gentrification and displacement (Horst et al. 2024).



Source: Santo et al. 2021. "The Safe Urban Harvests Study: An Assessment of Urban Farms and Community Gardens in Baltimore City." Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352135012_The_Safe_Urban_Harvests_Study_An_Assessment_of_Urban_Farms_and_Community_Gardens_in_Baltimore_City

Literature Review

Addressing Power Imbalances: From Access to Sovereignty

Urban agriculture can **reinforce societal inequities** when it benefits better-resourced organizations, and it can contribute to the displacement of lower-income households (Horst et al. 2024).

Hoover (2013) examines how urban agriculture initiatives, often led by middle-class white individuals, can unintentionally create exclusive "**white spaces**" within Black and Latino neighborhoods. Gazillo (2017) argues that urban agriculture policies often **fail to use an anti-racist lens**, which is crucial for addressing the needs of low-income Black and Brown communities. The legacy of policies like redlining has created unequal access to land and resources in the United States.

This is why it is critical to shift the focus from merely addressing food and land insecurity to promoting **food and land sovereignty**, which goes beyond access to emphasize community control over food and land systems (Santo 2014; Clendenning & Dressler 2013).

Historically, CLTs were **created by and for people with diminished socioeconomic power** (Davis 2014). CLTs can be a tool to address historic and ongoing inequalities by **collectivizing and redistributing land** with the active participation of marginalized communities in **decision-making processes** (Gazillo 2010). This is essential for protecting against speculative development and preventing displacement.



Source: Fu, Diana. "Food Security Versus Food Sovereignty." In Your Nature Mag. April 6, 2016.
<https://www.inournaturemag.com/all/food-security-versus-food-sovereignty>

Case Study: Boston, Massachusetts, USA



Morrow and Martin (2019) explore how urban food practices in Boston challenge traditional notions of property ownership.

Community members engage in planting, foraging, harvesting, and maintaining urban spaces at the **intersections of public and private property.**

Urban food practices create flexible understandings of property and ownership, allowing for shared use and stewardship of urban spaces. Case study illustrates how residents **negotiate access, responsibility, and care** for urban spaces, often without formal property ownership. Particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged communities, UA and CBA can be avenues toward sustainable food systems transformation and greater community resiliency through renegotiated, community-based property norms.



Case Study: Granby, Liverpool, UK

Thompson (2015) explores how CLTs can serve as **effective institutional solutions** to urban decline, particularly in the context of private property relations.

In Granby, a struggling inner-city neighborhood in Liverpool, UK, a CLT campaign utilized **guerrilla gardening** as a grassroots strategy to reclaim and beautify neglected urban spaces, gaining **political trust** and **financial support**.



Source: "Mature Guerilla Gardens Thrive on Cairns Street, 2023."
<https://www.guerrillagardening.org/>



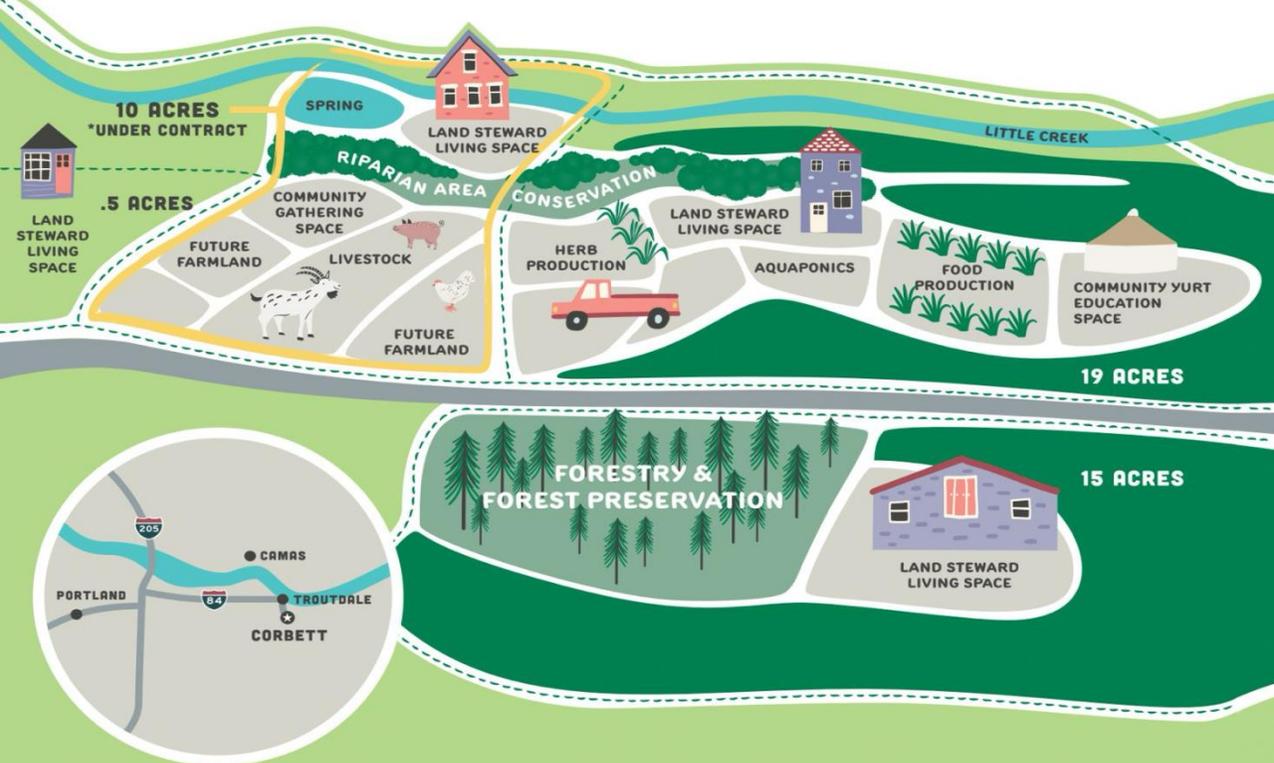
Source: Vaughan, Adam. "Meet the guerrilla gardeners who come in peace to revive our streets." The Times. June 12, 2023. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/meet-the-guerrilla-gardeners-who-come-in-peace-to-revive-our-streets-dkwtvrbjr>

Thompson discusses the potential of CLTs to provide **democratic stewardship of place**, allowing communities to collectively acquire and manage empty buildings **under conditions of austerity**.

Despite contradictions that threaten to undermine the political legitimacy of CLTs - such as **navigating neoliberal governance and private development interests** - CLTs, through commoning practices and collective control, offer a **promising alternative** to traditional market-led land restoration efforts.

Analysis

CLTs as a Tool of Land Reform



Source: Kuhnhausen, Kelsey. "Planting Seeds for Land Sovereignty." Oregon Land Trusts. September 9, 2023. <https://oregonlandtrusts.org/planting-seeds-bolt/>

Social movements are most effective when they come from the **needs and demands of marginalized communities**. This model is and has historically been particularly beneficial to communities who have been excluded from economic and political power. Gaining secure land ownership allows communities to **navigate out of economic precarity toward a place-based resilience**.

CLTs use **'the master's tools'** of institutional land use practices and policies to **resist** the hegemonic private property regime that **prioritizes individualization**, resulting in **social alienation** and **ecological degradation**.

This model can be an **effective and politically-acceptable method of land reform and power redistribution in the United States**. Within the current political system, we must use any and all tools at our disposal to draw power from the top back down to the community level.



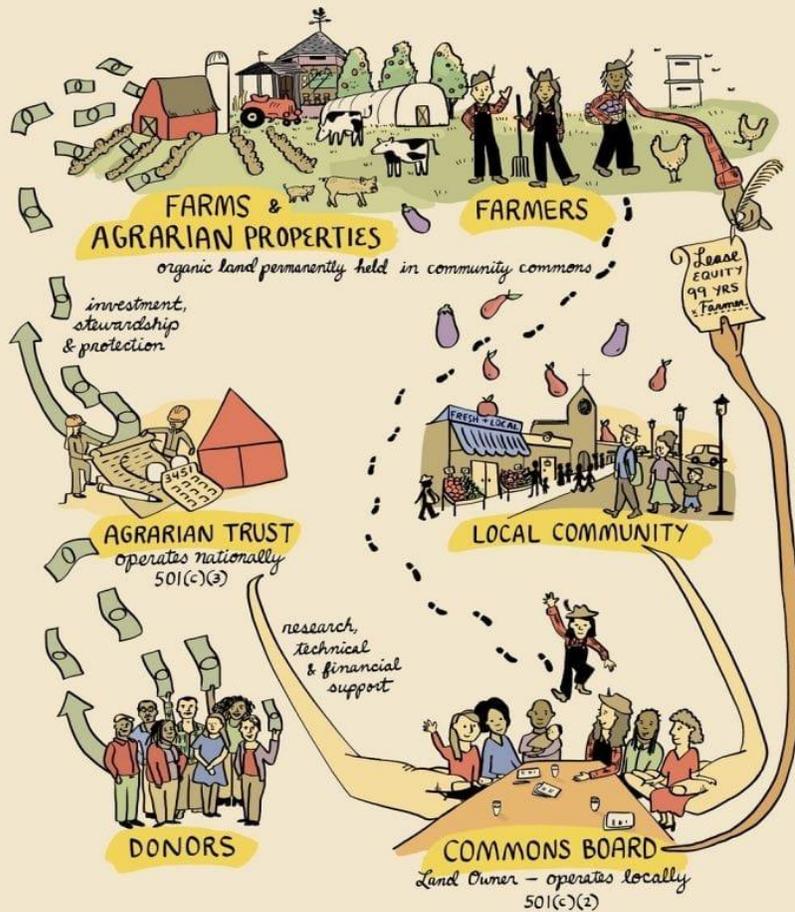
Source: Smith, Zoe. "Mutual aid is sweeping the world. Here's how we make this anarchist way of organising last." The Correspondent. June 2, 2020.

<https://thecorrespondent.com/504/mutual-aid-is-sweeping-the-world-heres-how-we-make-this-anarchist-way-of-organising-last>

Analysis:

Shared Land, Community Agriculture, and Sovereignty

How might we provide secure, equitable, long-term land tenure to farmers?



Agrarian Commons: Many Communities, One Trust

AGRARIAN TRUST

Under a model of collective land stewardship, growing food can be a **powerful vehicle for reconnection** - to community and to the land. Agriculture **links people to place** through **reciprocal practices** that improve both **ecological and human health**.

Care for the soil yields nutritious food, sustainable agricultural practices enhance local biodiversity, and shared harvests reinforce social bonds. In this way, agriculture can also be a technique for sustainable land management.

Community-based agriculture enables communities to **reclaim agency** over an integral element of their day-to-day life - food. It **cultivates resilience** by **reducing dependence on volatile global supply chains**, while also fostering self-reliance, cultural continuity, and a sense of belonging.

When these practices take place on community-owned land, it not only supports ecological regeneration but also becomes a foundation for food and land sovereignty. This allows communities define their own systems of food and land use **in alignment with their values, needs, and local ecosystems**.

Conclusions

The prevailing land use systems in the United States have generated **inequities in access and control**, while simultaneously **degrading ecological systems** and **disconnecting communities from land-based resilience practices** such as community agriculture. From a political ecology perspective, these outcomes are **not accidental** but are the product of historical and ongoing processes of exclusion, dispossession, and industrialization.

Addressing these **intersecting crises** requires a fundamental transformation of our land use systems. We must how to learn to live **within ecological limits** while **confronting the entrenched power structures** that shape land ownership and use.

As an aspiring land use planner, I feel compelled to engage with these challenges directly. This work demands a **multifaceted approach** - operating both within existing institutional frameworks and through grassroots, community-led initiatives. The research demonstrates that there is an urgent need for both **establishing more secure forms of land tenure and building more resilient communities**.

In this context, **community land trusts - particularly those oriented toward agricultural use - emerge as promising tools for advancing land and food sovereignty**. Though still relatively uncommon, their potential impact is significant. Planners and policymakers have a critical role to play in reshaping land governance to better reflect the needs of communities and advancing ecological sustainability. Across the United States, hundreds of land trusts are already engaged in the vital work of collective land stewardship. Supporting and expanding these efforts is essential to building a more **just, resilient, and ecologically safe future**.



Source: Anarchist Federation. January 20, 2023.

<https://www.anarchistfederation.net/cooperation-over-dependence-understanding-mutual-aid/>

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