**Roots for Peace:** A Case Study of Advancing Sustainable Food Growing in Public Housing

Roots for Peace, an initiative of the American Friends Service Committee’s Healthy Communities program, works with over 100 youth and community members to promote food justice as a mechanism for advancing peace in communities. Roots for Peace operates in Los Angeles’ most impacted communities, including immigrant and refugee communities, to equip youth and adults with a historical analysis of the racial and economic injustices that plague their neighborhoods. With this knowledge, community stakeholders are motivated to transform their communities through a diverse set of strategies, including sustainable agriculture and food justice.

**Struggling to Meet Our Sustainability Goals In Los Angeles**

Roots for Peace believes in the power of sustainable, regenerative food and food sovereignty. They advance these ideals through three primary strategies: building community capacity for composting and seed saving in urban gardens, educational empowerment through critical historical analysis and participatory research practices, and defending the right to grow food in impacted communities.

Roots for Peace’s work at Mar Vista Gardens in Culver City is an example of their holistic approach to defending the right to grow food. Mar Vista Gardens is a public housing project operated by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA), a 43-acre site with affordable units for very low-income families and households. It is recognized by the Los Angeles Conservancy as a publicly-owned garden apartment complex, with two-story residential buildings separated by open yard areas, making room for small tenant gardens. The tenants maximize the small open yard space to plant their gardens, with rose bushes brightening up the monotone color of the buildings.

For the past 7 years, Roots for Peace has worked within “the ecosystem of relationships, soil, and ground...built from the social fabric” of the community to develop projects that evolve into collective enterprises of peace at Mar Vista Gardens, said Program Director Crystal Gonzales. They organize public housing residents to sustainably grow food in their housing developments despite resistance from public housing maintenance staff. They work with organizations such as LA Compost to build compost hubs in the public housing site to restore the soil and promote regenerative agriculture practices. They utilize reconnecting people to the soil as a metaphor for reconnecting people with their ancestral roots and foodways.

Roots for Peace’s work at Mar Vista Gardens has led them to be at the forefront of a public housing policy initiative that will impact 15 different housing sites and over 60,000 residents. This policy initiative aims to ensure that all public housing residents have the right to grow food and mandates that the Housing Authority eliminates barriers to food growing in public housing developments.

Supporting food growing in public housing encourages community building among residents, which leads to reduced violence and improves the aesthetic and health of the communities. To this end, Roots for Peace is promoting the concept of food sovereignty[[1]](#footnote-0) within their spaces as a means of ensuring a more just and sustainable food system in the future.

1. Food sovereignty, as first defined by La Via Campesina in 1996 refers to 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. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)