

**The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative: Addressing the United Nations
Sustainable Development Goals through an Economic, Environmental, and Social
Lens**

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The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative is making a positive impact on the concept of sustainable leadership through agricultural production, community services, and shared best practices of urban farming. This essay will critically review the impact of the initiative on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through an economic, environmental, and social lens. These topics will be covered in the following sections:

- Introduction to the Initiative
- Challenges
- Opportunities
- Practical Application
- Conclusion

Introduction to the Initiative

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative is a non-governmental organization based in Detroit, Michigan, USA. They are a sustainable agriculture organization that was founded in 2011 by two University of Michigan students who wanted to connect the university and the city in a more impactful way. Thirteen years into their endeavor, the initiative has grown from a dilapidated plot of land to a thriving urban farm that serves the community in a multitude of ways. According to the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative website, their mission is:

“To use urban agriculture as a platform to promote education, sustainability, and community in an effort to empower urban communities, solve many social problems facing Detroit, and potentially develop a broader model for redevelopment for other urban communities”.

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has three acres of land in the North End neighborhood of Detroit. The campus offers a wide range of agricultural and built-environment resources that serve the community. Approximately two thirds of the campus is dedicated to farming production and interactive agriculture, and one third of the land is occupied by various buildings, such as a community resource center, farm to table café, and public composting restroom. They provide food to their local community at a pay-what-you-can rate (viewed as donations) and any extra food is sold to local restaurants and markets within the city (Michigan Urban Farming Initiative, 2024).

Before analyzing the challenges and opportunities of urban farming, it is important to understand the socioeconomic situation of the community. The city of Detroit has struggled compared to other large cities in the United States. The city declared financial bankruptcy in 2013, making it the largest municipality to do so in the United States. In 2023, Detroit had a median household income of \$36,453 USD, making it one of the lowest among large cities in the United States. Detroit has one of the highest rates of abandoned homes in the country, at 21.9% in 2022 (Bureau, U. C., 2024). These statistics allude to broader issues impacting the city, such as poverty, food insecurity, high crime rates, and limited access to quality healthcare and education. The city has

made immense improvements since the bankruptcy in 2013, however, there are still many improvements that are needed to raise the overall quality of life for current and future citizens of the city. Academic studies show that it is challenging for individuals and communities to prioritize environmental sustainability when they are struggling financially (Leal Filho et al, 2021).

The Citizens Research Council of Michigan conducted a report in 2024 titled, *An Assessment of Detroit's Economic Condition and a Critique of its Economic Development Efforts*, to evaluate the city's economic progress since the bankruptcy. One of their key findings is that "Detroit's economy has improved substantially since it filed for bankruptcy a decade ago, yet the city still has serious socioeconomic problems that, when combined with high property tax rates, make it hard to attract and retain businesses" (Tatum, 2024). These points relate to the issue of food-insecurity and access to fresh food for residents. According to the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, 65% of residents do not have consistent access to affordable and healthy food options (Brooker, 2024). The Planet Detroit Organization states that a large part of the problem is a lack of grocery stores. "Between 2017 and 2022, Detroit lost 10 full-line grocery stores, leaving 64. The Detroit Food Policy Council recommends having 30,000 square feet of grocery available for every 10,000 people" (Brooker, 2024).

The unaddressed food needs of the city's residents can be filled in part by programs such as the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative. Urban farming provides fresh and healthy food options in areas of the city where there are either no grocery store options, or the options are too expensive for the residents. Urban agriculture also addresses several of the United Nations SDGs. In a case study on urban small-scale food production in relation to the SDGs, they found "the impacts of UA (urban agriculture) within society were identified in relation to specific targets such as no poverty, zero hunger, sustainable communities and cities, and climate action" (Yuan et al, 2022). Food insecure areas are often located far from large-scale food production sources. Urban agriculture can help overcome the barriers of supply and value chain distance by creating fresh and nutritious food production locally.

Challenges

Small-scale urban agriculture faces unique challenges, especially when compared to large-scale industrial agriculture. There are existing systemic problems related to capitalism, globalism, mass production and overconsumption that make it difficult for urban agriculture to scale in a way that is economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable. This is especially true in the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world that we live in, which adds additional obstacles for leaders pursuing urban agricultural initiatives (Bernstein & Euchner, 2023). With such wide-spread and pervasive systemic challenges, it can be overwhelming for leaders to know where to start in their sustainability journey. Focusing on the United Nation's SDGs can help leaders navigate the VUCA world in a way that is impactful and enduring.

In the example of the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative, their mission statement aligns with many aspects of the SDGs. However, before exploring the impact and opportunities of this initiative on the SDGs, it is vital to understand the main challenges they face. In an academic study conducted on the challenges and opportunities of urban agriculture, they noted that there are drastic differences between developed and developing countries in terms of the urban agriculture experiences and outcomes (Wadumestrigue et al, 2021). This highlights that local factors, such as economic, environmental, and social, have a large impact on urban farming.

One of the first and most critical elements of pursuing urban farming is the legality of it. The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has faced this issue given the lack of legal framework at the national level in the USA, and within the city and state that they operate in. This issue is not exclusive to Detroit, which once again reinforces the impact of local factors, which vary around the world. The benefits that the initiative offers to the Detroit community have been evidenced, however, there are other parties in the city who feel the downsides are not worth the benefits. According to an academic report on the legal framework for legitimizing urban farming in the USA, a main opposing concern is that government officials think urban farming initiatives “are not an appropriate way to address the problem of shrinking populations, and state legislation stunts the potential efforts to legitimize city farming practices” (Heckler, 2021).

As previously shared, the city has struggled from a socioeconomic perspective, which has contributed to issues such as population decline, blight, and food insecurity. The local government regulations are currently restrictive to urban agriculture scaling. One reason is the concern about soil safety due to the potentially harmful remnants in the ground where urban farms operate. Detroit is an industrious city with many manufacturing facilities in the city limits, mostly centered around automotive production. Due to the heavy industry, there have been reports of harmful residue in the ground (Miller et al, 2020). Urban farming is largely unregulated which means consistent, thorough, and trustworthy testing is not always performed. This puts people at risk if they consume food from unsafe soil. This environmental issue poses health threats to the community and legal risk for the food producers. This issue is hard for small-scale farms to manage considering they are often operating with limited resources.

Another reason for contestation from city regulators is that urban farming may not spur further economic development and population growth. Population growth leads to a larger tax base and more consumers. Dedicating more land to agriculture means that there is less space for people to live and for businesses to occupy. With such an abundance of vacant land, the point of “how exactly Detroit should expand UA has been highly contested. Debates have centered on how and for whom scaling up production should occur” (Erickson, 2022). The world’s largest urban agriculture site is in Detroit, called Hantz Farms. This site was initially proposed to be a 20,000 acre tree farm, however, residents and city regulators were concerned that this was a “land grab” and it wouldn’t truly benefit the community (Safransky, 2016). Due to the negative response, the organization changed their name to Hantz Woodlands and only acquired 140 acres. Although the project was scaled back, their efforts seemed to be nothing more than a

large-scale land-grab that could have been executed in a way that was more beneficial to the surrounding area. “These land grab fears appear justified as Hantz, from 2019 to 2021, sold off roughly 10% (147 parcels) of their total holdings for \$2.8 million to real estate investors and other development interests” (Safransky, 2016).

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has caught the windfall of the situation with Hantz Woodlands. Their actions are more closely watched and scrutinized, whether that is warranted or not. The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative co-founder and president, Tyson Gersh, shared that they were met with resistant from the city in obtaining the deeds for some of the properties they have tried to acquire, according to a statement shared in The Detroit News. Detroit City Planner, Kathryn Lynch Underwood stated that “the city has not yet specifically designated areas where they do or do not want agriculture to happen. That’s still — with all the vacant land — a challenge that the city has” (Ferretti, 2016).

While there are complicated and abundant challenges facing the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative and other small-scale urban farms, there is ample opportunity for them to make a positive impact. These local initiatives have the potential to contribute to the United Nations SDGs and fight against systemic problems related to capitalism, globalism, mass production and overconsumption.

Opportunities

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has the potential to address numerous United Nations SDGs related to economic, environmental, and social topics. Despite the challenges facing urban agriculture, there are ample opportunities to make a positive impact and address systemic challenges holding society back on their journey towards a more sustainable future.

The most straightforward goal that urban agriculture can address is goal number two: Zero Hunger, which aims to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” (United Nations, 2024). In it’s simplest form, the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative serves as a means to provide free food to the neighboring community, which struggles with food insecurity. “Without access to fresh, healthy food, many families end up surviving on the Wonder Bread and Kraft Dinner available at their local CVS. Urban farms help them thrive by putting healthy produce at their doorsteps and on their plates” (EcoWatch, 2021). Free access to nutritious food can impact residents in a positive way, leading to better health and eating habits. This is where education and social engagement come into play.

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative also addresses goal number three: Good Health and Well-Being, to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” (United Nations, 2024). The organization actively strives to engage with the local community by promoting agriculture, healthy eating, sustainability, and volunteerism. In an academic study on the health benefits of urban agriculture, the key findings in their research showed that:

- *“The experience of growing food is correlated with its consumption; the more experience people have growing food, the more likely they are to eat it.*
- *Urban gardening and farming involve city dwellers in healthy, active work and recreation.*
- *Urban agriculture builds safe, healthy, and green environments in neighborhoods, schools, and abandoned areas.” (Bellows, 2008)*

While it can be argued that agriculture may not be the best value for use of land in urban areas, it is hard to justify this argument when the city’s population and commerce are declining, such as in Detroit. Blight and food deserts are evidenced issues in Detroit and other shrinking cities. Therefore, there is an opportunity for city regulators to incorporate urban agriculture into their planning for “smart decline” (Bellows, 2008). This is a concept that embraces shrinkage and allows cities to turn challenges into opportunities that support the community from an economic, environmental, and social perspective. Repurposing vacant land and abandoned buildings for agricultural purposes has mutual benefits for the city, the agricultural operators, and the neighboring residents (Bellows, 2008). While this concept sounds positive, it has not been a straightforward path for sustainability leaders in Detroit trying to pursue urban farming.

Tyson Gersh of the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative stated in a Detroit Free Press interview that, “I have brought millennials to Detroit. They get sold on this dream of Detroit. Once they get here, they see disparity. It is not what they hoped for. We are selling this dream and it needs to be real” (Cain, 2016). According to the organization’s website, the farm brings thousands of tourists and volunteers to the area every year. They engage with academic universities and other local organizations. The city and state are struggling to attract new residents, and especially young residents who are choosing to leave the area after they complete school. The point Gersh is making in the article is that the city should embrace and support the organization’s effort to sell the dream of Detroit and retain and attract residents. However, the framework to support these opportunities is lacking. Integrating “smart decline” into the city’s governance is an opportunity for them to control and support the scaling of urban agriculture. “Urban agriculture can only be sustained if city authorities consciously integrate agriculture into the city land use planning and zoning processes” (Abagna Azunre et al, 2019).

The initiative also addresses goal number 13: Climate Action, which is to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” and goal number 15: Life on Land, to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss” (United Nations, 2024). The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative labels itself as a sustainable organization. They demonstrate this with specific examples of organic growing, composting, and a water harvesting system. Urban farming can increase biodiversity in the local community, and it reduces the distance between the production source and end consumer. According to the United Nations, this reduces the

carbon emissions and sustainability inefficiencies associated with the often widely dispersed and complex supply chains in the food industry.

Practical Application

In relation to the wide-spread and pervasive systemic issues mentioned earlier, the global economy and consumers need to operate in a different way if society is to have a chance at a more sustainable future. Urban farming organizations, such as the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative, can play a part in leading this shift by focusing their objectives and operating model on achieving the SDGs. In doing so, they can serve as community leaders and catalysts for positive change.

Developing a framework centered around achieving the SDGs requires a change in mindset that goes against the typical capitalist and globalist actions engrained in much of the global north and western hemisphere (Gilpin, 2000). “When informal ventures, micro and small enterprises are empowered, they drive positive change, leading to the attainment of SDGs” (Koshy, 2022). The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has an opportunity to lead their local community towards a more sustainable way of living for current and future generations. This concept can be applied through the “Change Life Cycle Framework” (Harrington et al, 2015). Below is an outline of a potential organizational business strategy for the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative to execute this framework.

The current business objectives, which are outlined at a high level in the organization’s mission statement, are the foundation of the change management plan. Urban farming in Detroit has evidenced benefits, however, certain situations and circumstances have caused distrust and lack of interest from some city regulators and residents. The organization needs to overcome this and demonstrate that they can positively contribute to the community from an economic, environmental, and social perspective.

The next step in the framework is to plan for change. The main objective of the plan is to engage with stakeholders and community members to educate them on the benefits of the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative and how they can take part in creating a healthier, wealthier, and more sustainable future. The organization can do so by collecting feedback from residents and government officials on how the organization can best support the community. They can also highlight the work that they are already doing and the positive impact they have made. Research shows that when people actively participate in decisions and change management processes, they will be more engaged and supportive (Bellows, 2008).

The plan can be executed through the organizations full time staff and community volunteers. The community volunteers are likely already aligned with the mission and vision of the organization, meaning they can serve as reliable community ambassadors to educate others and influence them to take part in the urban farming initiatives.

The social and environmental aspects of the initiative are important, but the initiative must have proper funding to sustain itself economically. As a not-for-profit non-governmental organization, funding from personal donors, government grants, and corporate partnerships are vital. Additional community exposure and education can help increase economic opportunities without jeopardizing the integrity of the mission.

Once the framework is rolled out, measuring success and listening to feedback can help the initiative continue growing and improving the mission and commitment to achieving the SDGs. The active engagement with the community, government, and corporate partners must continue through “ongoing communication, consultation and representation of stakeholders” (Harrington et al, 2015).

This Change Life Cycle Framework can help the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative achieve the societal paradigm shift that is needed to achieve the SDGs and move economic deliverables and consumer behaviors in a more sustainable direction. In doing this, they can bring the community along with them on their sustainability journey, ushering in a better future for the city of Detroit and its current and future residents.

Conclusion

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative has many challenges and opportunities. If the appropriate leadership style is applied, there is great potential to have a positive impact on the community and address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through an economic, environmental, and social lens. With agricultural production, community services, and shared best practices of urban farming, the organization is on a journey to tackle some of the most pressing sustainability challenges facing society.

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