

CULTIVATING COMMUNITY CONNECTION: STORYTELLING AND FOOD ACCESS IN EAST SAN JOSÉ



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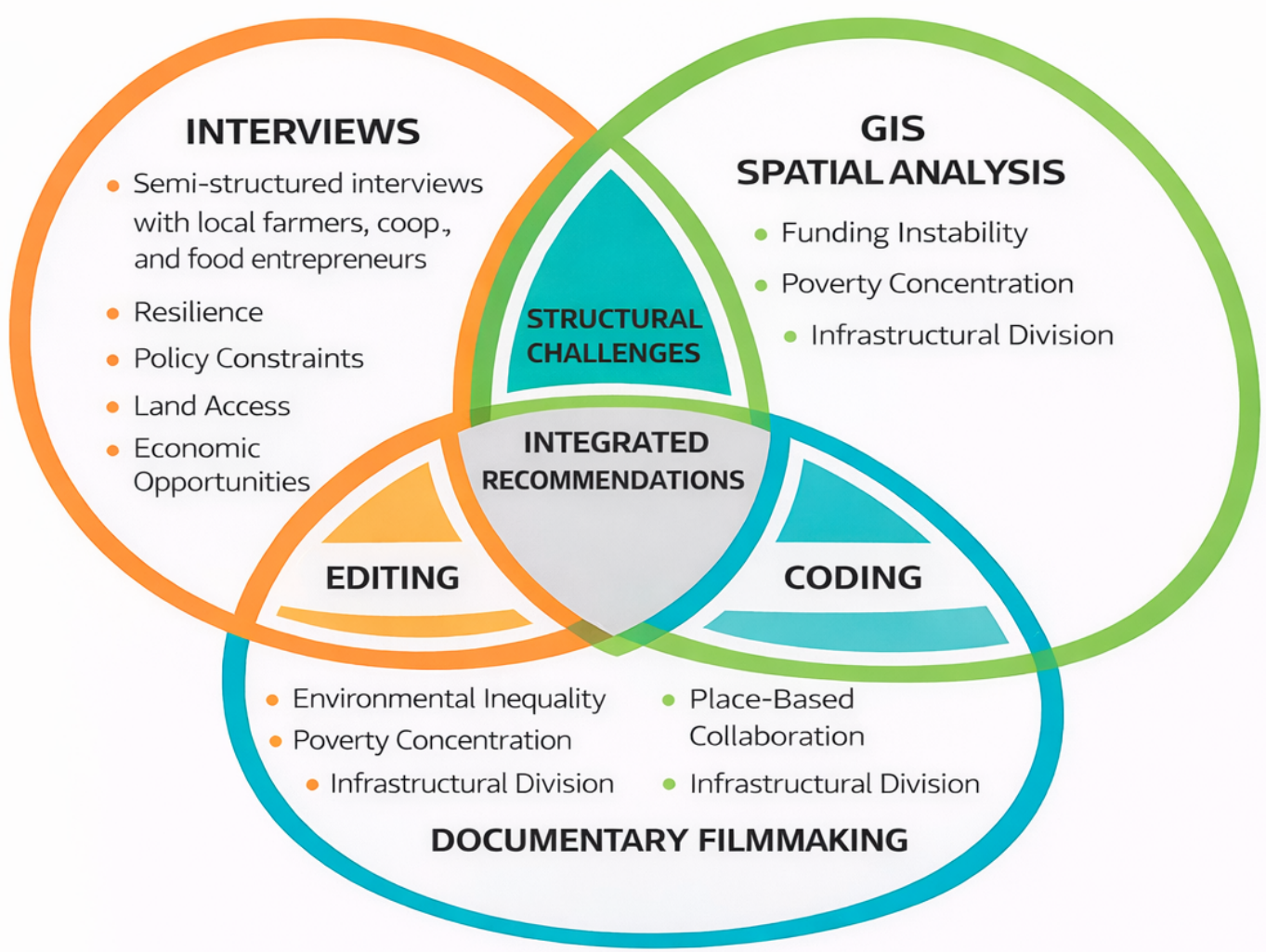
Introduction

Veggielution¹ is a community-based urban farm and food justice organization in East San José, California. Located in a historically underinvested and predominantly Latinx immigrant community,² Veggielution works to “connect people from diverse backgrounds through food and farming to build community.”¹ Due to recent government funding cuts, the organization now faces structural precarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Veggielution distributed up to ~5,000 food boxes per week, but this has since declined to approximately ~100 boxes weekly, leaving only one full-time farmer managing the fields and increasing labor strain. These challenges occur within broader conditions in East San José, where high housing costs, environmental inequality, and infrastructural division continue to shape food access and community well-being.

Objectives

1. Document and amplify the lived experiences of East San José food entrepreneurs, farmers, and advocates.
2. Map spatial patterns of food insecurity, poverty concentration, environmental burden, and infrastructural division.
3. Produce a short-form documentary video to support Veggielution’s funding, outreach, and policy engagement efforts.

Methodology



Source: Video Documentary

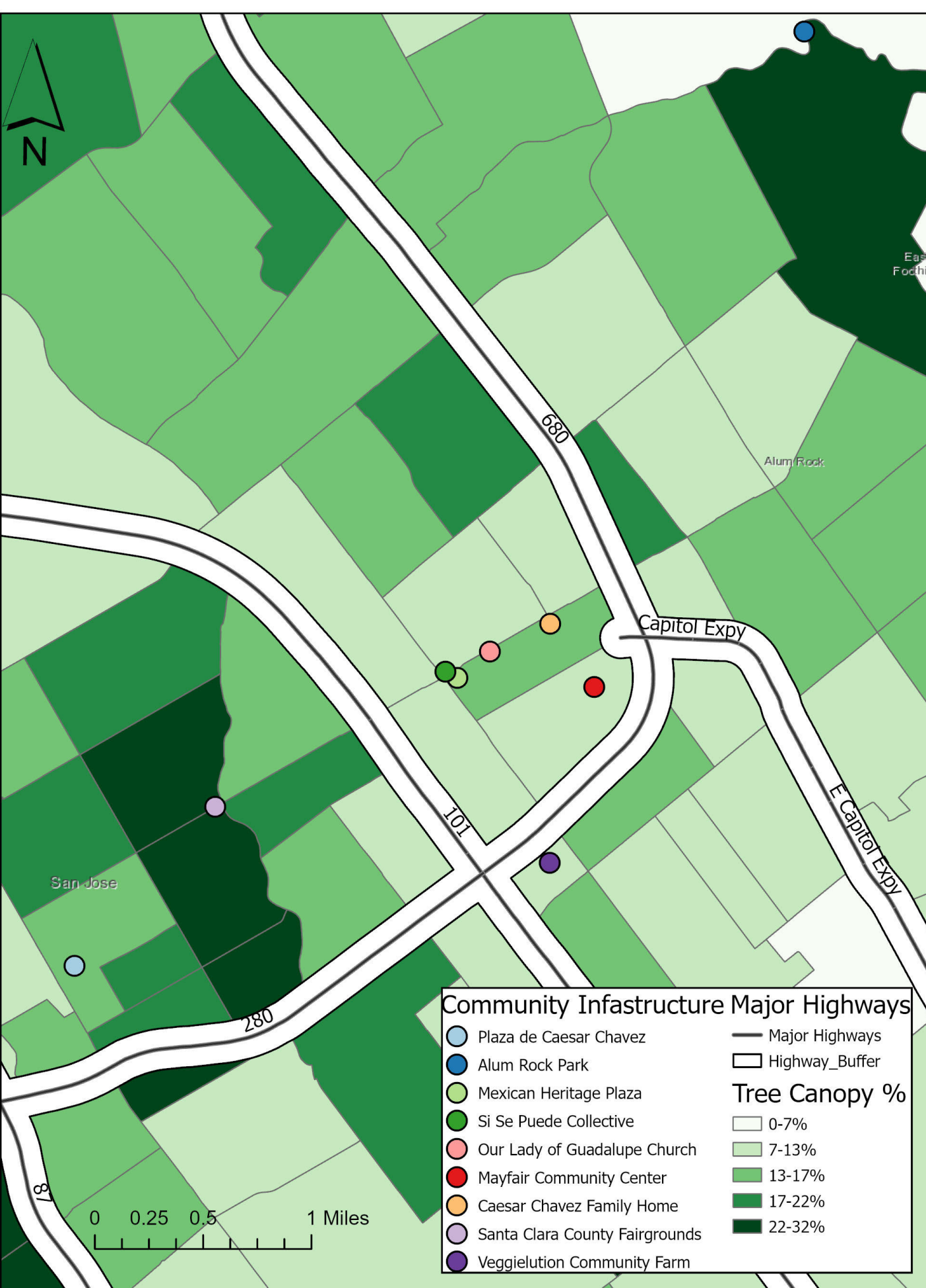


“Unfortunately, minorities, Hispanics, and the most vulnerable communities are denied food justice.”
“Veggielution opened its doors to me during COVID and my life changed. Today I’m here running my own business.”
–Quelites Cooperative Members

Community Infrastructure Sites Relative to Poverty and Major Highways, East San José



Community Infrastructure Relative to Tree Canopy and Major Highways, East San José



Key Quotes:

“Veggielution is a second home for the community.”

“Many people depend on food banks, but they often offer processed food instead of fresh produce.”

“Families' main need is to pay rent and then eat. That's why they sometimes can't afford nutritious food.”

“Grants and government money is what makes us strong. So right now we are weak because there’s no money.”

“To get funding, sometimes you don’t even know how to apply or express yourself.”

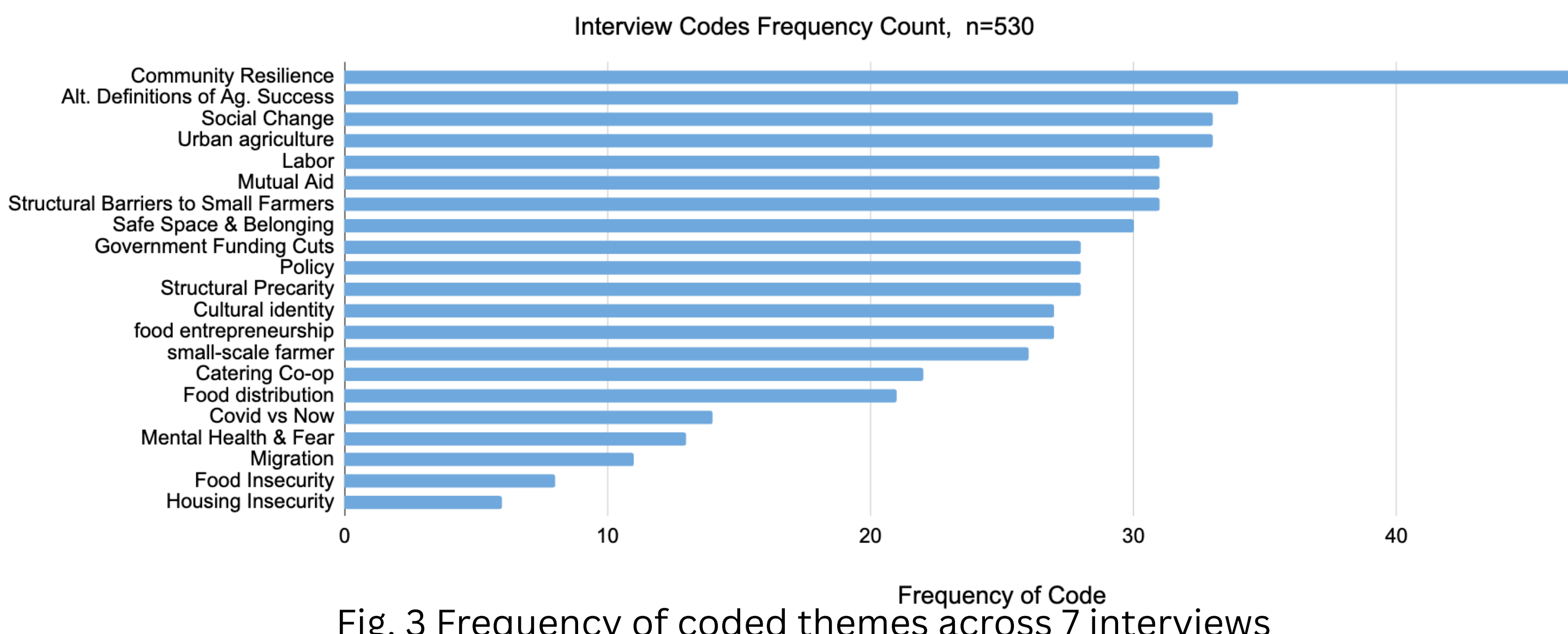


Fig. 3 Frequency of coded themes across 7 interviews

Synthesis

Interview insights and spatial analysis reveal several interconnected patterns:

- Food insecurity in East San José is structural and place-based, shaped by housing instability, environmental burdens, and infrastructure barriers.
- Community farms function as critical infrastructure, supporting food access, cultural traditions, and community well-being.
- Despite funding cuts and labor constraints, strong cultural networks sustain resilience within the community.
- Community members redefine agricultural success through soil health, worker well-being, cultural preservation, and belonging.

Led to the creation of a short documentary amplifying community voices and lived experiences:

Cultivating Community: Stories from Veggielution

This short documentary highlights the experiences of farmers, food entrepreneurs, and community members working to strengthen food systems in East San José.



Source: Video Documentary

Conclusion

By documenting the lived experiences of East San José farmers, food entrepreneurs, and community advocates, this research highlights how food insecurity is shaped by broader structural forces rather than individual circumstances. GIS mapping revealed overlapping patterns of housing insecurity, environmental burdens, and infrastructural fragmentation, demonstrating that food access challenges in East San José are deeply place-based. Interviews and documentary storytelling further emphasized the role of culturally grounded food systems and cooperative networks in sustaining community resilience. At the same time, participants’ experiences show how unstable public funding creates structural precarity for community-based food systems, underscoring the need for stronger institutional support.

Recommendations

Stabilize Public Funding for Community Food Systems

Community farms like Veggielution function as essential local food infrastructure. Long-term public investment would stabilize staffing, food distribution, and community programs.

Reduce Structural Barriers for Small and Immigrant Farmers

Simplifying grant processes, and expanding multilingual resources would improve equitable access to agricultural funding.

Integrate Food Justice into Housing and Environmental Planning

Food access should be incorporated into housing, environmental, and transportation planning to address overlap of structural inequalities.

Key Sources & Acknowledgements

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¹ = Veggielution. (n.d.). Our Farm. <https://veggielution.org>

² = U.S. Census Bureau. Demographic Profile: East San José, CA.

³ = Owasa, H. and Kabaseke, C. (2024) Reclaiming Agroecology: From Market Logic to Critical Food Sovereignty. American Journal of Climate Change, 13, 760-778. doi: [10.4236/ajcc.2024.134036](https://doi.org/10.4236/ajcc.2024.134036).