

Direct transcript from Climate Action Lab meeting #1, September 28, 2018
Topic: Food Justice

Saara Nafici
Value Added Farm, Red Hook, Brooklyn.

So, Red Hook: I want to tell you a little bit about the context we're working in.

We have a two-pronged mission: One is to work with young people in an empowerment model so we are building a core of green leaders and stewards. And the other part of our mission is to feed our neighborhood.

Red Hook was a port community. When the ports were more active on that side of Brooklyn, a lot of the workers lived in Red Hook.

Red Hook is actually home to the second largest public housing development in NYC. The official numbers put it at 65% of the neighborhood. The unofficial numbers are much higher. Though NYCHA thinks maybe 7000 people live there; but there are 7000 people just in the building adjacent to the farm. So we are thinking about the majority of who lives and works in Red Hook.

You might also know that Red Hook has been experiencing a wave of gentrification. So there are luxury buildings all over the place that they can't fill yet, but they're still building them. We'll come to that contradiction later--a neighborhood that is below sea level that is actually very expensive.

So I'm going to now tell you about the farms. This is the Red Hook Community Farm. It is the largest urban farm in Brooklyn. It is 2.75 acres. We share it with the NYC Compost Project, so we have about 200 tons of food waste that's being composted on one side of the farm, and on the other side we are growing about 20,000 pounds of produce. That is a lot of vegetables!

We have two farm sites. The second farm site is actually located in the NYCHA building I mentioned earlier. It is a partnership between NYCHA, Added Value, and an organization called Green Force, which hires young people.

So between these two farms, we're growing a lot of vegetables, and one might ask does Red Hook really *need* all those vegetables? Because right there is Fair Way, and down the road is Whole Foods. And you laugh, but we get pushback sometimes for calling our neighborhood a "food desert."

What the houses have a lot of is pharmacies. There are plenty of places to get your diabetes drugs etc. The most access that our neighbors have in Red Hook is to pharmaceuticals. But if you ask, have you been to Fairway? That is like a different universe. Besides jobs, and I give them credit that they do hire people, but that is not where people are shopping. We did a community survey a few years ago, and about 60%

of people said they *do* leave their neighborhood for food. So what does that mean for a community that is already poor? To pay for that car? to pay for that time? To pay for those trips?

So we have these two farms. The NYCHA Farm and the Red Hook Community Farm. We hire young people, 14-19, we pay them for every minute that they are there. We have farm interns, senior apprentices, a tiered program so they're learning all the agricultural skills, horticultural skills, how to sew seeds, how to harvest, how to manage water, pest management, farm stands are run by the young people. But at the same time, we know that not all of them, probably none of them, are actually going to go into farming. That's something we hear a lot: "What percentage of your alumni are farmers?" Doesn't matter. What percentage of our young people knows where our food comes from? Understands what food justice looks like? Can map the resources in their neighborhood? And think about what they can do about it? And feel that connection to the community. So we see the farm as a vehicle for youth empowerment and community engagement--in addition to growing all this amazing food.

We are hyperlocal. We hire young people seed to sale. But we are not insulated from national politics. Here is an example: We have a community farm stand over by the community center. But a few months ago, the operator that allows us to take SNAP benefits, i.e. food stamps, lost a no-bid contract, and basically was going to go out of business. Which meant all of the farm stands in NYC would no longer be able to take SNAP benefits. There was a real panic. There are some farm stands where that is *how* they reach people. The USDA is the one who gave us the equipment to be able to take the benefits, but the USDA is also the one that has the no-bid contract. But who was this new contractor? These tiny little decisions being made in some conference room in DC, and were left holding the bag. There is a temporary fix that NY state is fronting the money for, but come next year we don't know if they're going to be able to take SNAP at farmers markets.

So this is a tiny little farm stand. We get maybe 60-70 people come through on a Wednesday afternoon. This is not the Union Square farmers market. But for the people in the area, around the community center and the senior center, this is their place to come and get their quillombo, their okra, whatever they need. We are growing food that we know our neighbors like, and that they've asked for. We have to plant extra long beans next year, because there's a small Asian population that comes and takes the whole thing. So what is our role in the local food system, and how can we be hyperlocal while understanding the national context?

Another example of that, and how we are not insulated, no matter how insular it may sometimes feel: we do these cooking demonstrations, where our young people are community chefs. We want people to try different vegetables, we've been working with the Department of Health. So we meet with all these other sites that are doing these awesome cooking demonstrations. But this year, we're hearing, no one is coming in, no one is coming to the cooking demos. Why would people not come? A lot of their populations are immigrants and they don't want to access public services. They're scared.

So were doing a cool cooking demo about how to work with eggplant, but we are inherently connected to the politics of the country right now.

And in being connected, we have to recognize that Red Hook is part of larger borough, the city, the state, and national. So we are one of the four organizing members of the youth food justice network; what we are trying to do is connect our young people to their young people to these larger movements that are happening. We went to the climate march last year, we've done it in DC and up here in NYC.

So when they grow that vegetable, what does it mean? How does it connect? Why didn't their local grocery store re-open after Hurricane Sandy? It puts their work in a context. connects them not just to the land, to their community, but to other groups in Philly, CT, go to conferences, makes them feel like part of a bigger network.

Now, I do have to tell the Sandy story. We see the farm as an ecosystem. It is not just there for us to produce food. The farm is there as a piece of land that is performing all these different ecological services. We plant a certain flower--its not a good cut flower, you cant eat it, but the monarchs love it. We think about all the different services that a farm can provide and try and support them.

So in 2012, with Hurricane Sandy, the farm washed away. It was under four feet of water. And in rebuilding, in thinking about resiliency, we partnered with the department of sanitation to raise the farm up by two feet. So minor flooding we can handle in the future. But what did it look like for the rest of the neighborhood? As I said, most of the young people we hire and the people we feed live in the houses. Our office actually is an apartment in the houses, along with other nonprofits. All the houses had mold. The temporary boilers are still there. A sea-wall was built on one side of the neighborhood with these giant kind of straw-bale things; and at the same time, there are luxury building after building conversions happening, as well as landlords sitting on properties, waiting for when its going to be most profitable. And we have community meetings, and they make promises, but what does it mean to have a community that is below sea level, it should be cheap housing, its not safe; so what kind of privilege does it take to say "I am so wealthy that I can live in this apartment and just leave when I need to?"

The farm is a community space, its a public space, we grow what our community wants. I was reading the description of CAL, and I read it to some of the youth and some of the staff, and we were like "whooooaa." Its not like its wrong, but the farm is also a site of joy. The young people working there, in all weather--we are farmers, I know I'm wearing purple lipstick, but we are farmers--we are there in all kind of whether growing, harvesting, repairing the beds, its joyful work. If it wasn't joyful work. I know some of our youth struggle in the classroom, and dont feel valued in the school system, but they do on the farm. Its a concrete way to do something, to do something positive and engaging, a life skill that will take them on many possible professional paths that they might pursue.

So, I invite you all to the farm. Its a very special place. Thank you.

Mychal Johnson
South Bronx United

Thank you for inviting me to speak about some of the things happening in our community, in the South Bronx in Mott Haven, Port Morris, Hunts Point.

We're facing in our community that have been going on for decades, it's a cycle of supposed economic development, jobs, quality of life, increasing that by way of giving money to developers to build the biggest maritime industrial area in the south Bronx, bringing thousands of diesel trucks to our community. We have the largest SMEA in NYC are. 80 acres leading from Mott Haven to Port Morris to Hunts Point we have waste transfer, fossil plants, heavy diesel, Hunts Point market, bringing food to NYC but also, supposedly, bringing food to a food desert. And we are the poorest congressional district in the US, unemployment rates three times the national average, 1 in 5 of children has asthma, poverty rate is 49 % for our children. So all the economic development supposed to be coming into our community, where these agencies are dumping hundreds of millions of dollars into this peninsula to create this large SMIA (Significant Maritime Industrial Area), nothing has really come from it. We are still the poorest district, still have worst air quality, and still a food desert.

This gives you an idea of some of the industrial facilities, the blue dots. The red is asthma hospitalization rates in relation to where the industrial facilities are located; This down here is Port Morris and Mott Haven up here is Riverdale. Notice you see very few dots. You see everything that comes with high concentrations of the carcinogen that is in diesel truck emissions, you see them concentrated here. You see what South Bronx residents are suffering from. The businesses and the 3 highways and bridges that encircle our community. The largest maritime industrial area in the city.

Here is a map of the SMIA I was telling you about: Port Morris, Mott Haven, Hunts Point. Our peninsula has no direct access to the water that surrounds us. This is our only park. And our community has the lowest quantity of green space per capita than any other community in NYC, even though we're shouldering all the industrial burdens. No direct access.

So, this FEMA flood map after Sandy, shows that all the industrial facilities are in heavy flood zones, which actually is threatening our community. After Sandy, some lessons were learned in communities that were really affected. Sea Walls, the Big U in Lower Manhattan around Wall Street. But because our community was hit during low tide, and the reverse effect of what happened downtown, we didn't see a lot of water, though we did see 4 1/2 feet of water breach our shores here:

So an example of one of these deals that is supposed to bring development to our community is the re-location of Fresh Direct. Have many of you heard of Fresh Direct?

This is a fight we've been waging since 2012, where local officials, Bloomberg, Cuomo, sought to give Fresh Direct 150 million dollars to Fresh Direct to bring facility from Queens to South Bronx waterfront. Bringing all these new diesel emissions to a place already considered "Asthma Alley." So its like more of the same. More dumping.

This land here is public owned by the state of New York, but no public access to it or benefit from it. So now, on top of the stuff already dumped here, now we get Fresh Direct. Scheduled to be 400,000 feet, now its going to be 800,000 sq. feet.

Here are the surrounding bridges; here is are housing developments, we actually have the largest concentration of public housing--5 developments, 90,000 people who are going to have no access to this land. Here's Wall St Journal, NY Post; here are fossil fuel power plants. Pataki put ten around the state, four of them right here.

This public land, again, being used for industrial sites, despite this dream of creating food access for people of color. We know that Fresh Direct is not offering *this* for our community--this is something *we* would like to have [slide of "what are the alternatives for our waterfront?"]. Like you were saying in Red hook--we want to create an Urban Farm in this area, since were a food desert. Why not create something that viable, that creates jobs, also create permeable surfaces for the protection of a flood zone, creating a resilient waterfront.

This is our waterfront plan created in response to all the dumping of industrial facilities, and lack of recreational space, which is leading to some of the highest levels of obesity and diabetes in the city and asthma; its been well documented that urban frames green spaces, green esplanades, would increase our quality of life. So as a response to what has not been planned--there is no mitigation plan for our flood zone--right here is 400,00 gallons of home heating oil, here are the fossil fuel power plants, waste transfer stations, the NY Post and WSJ, the 800,000 sq. foot Fresh Direct...

We are a food desert, and in response they're giving us this [Fresh Direct ads]. Is this geared to the South Bronx? No, Fresh Direct was not meant for us, to better our quality of life. It is only geared toward folks with higher economic opportunities who get their food by pushing a button and its delivered to their door. So were getting 1000 diesel trucks a day, enabled by 150 million tax subsidy to relocate. Here is their traffic map showing where they are driving by our schools and homes.

This picture is after Sandy. This is the land they're going to build upon. About 40 acres. Having that would have been a great benefit to create a farm, more green space, which we dont have. These are damaged trucks Fresh Direct brought from LIC and placed on our waterfront. We protested that, we got the media involved, and they removed them after a few days. But its a really good example of how they dump on this community. In response to all that, we mobilized our community and started protesting, broadening awareness. Because of our lack of green space, we have worked to create numerous community gardens. And here we see people in a cherry blossom circle, going around talking about how we are going to create our own solutions. This is back in 2014, the

climate march (replica of a Fresh Direct truck used in the march). We have had to activate against this assault on a poor community of color, knowing the serious health consequences at stake.

Starting in 2012, we launched a lawsuit and a boycott against Fresh Direct, NYC, and State of New York because they have been relying on environmental impact statements 21 years old, even though the population has changed, and the science has changed in terms of knowing about the carcinogens in these emissions. The court ruled in favor of Fresh Direct and relying of the outdated, low-impact statement.

We have kept fighting and what we have now created in response to how public land is being used to oppress our community, land that should be providing public benefits, we have community land trust that has coupled with many different organizations--What we are trying to do is take over publically owned spaces by acquiring or stewarding--that's me leaning up against that building right there--public spaces that are empty. We are creating a health education and the arts building-called HARTS--so we can create our own solutions around health, education problems; sorry to keep presenting all of this negative information--but part of creating the positive solutions is to identify what's wrong. Its been that cycle of putting money into entities that are not bring solutions. its top-down rather than ground up; were ground up. Were doing visioning sessions, what are the possibilities of not only for this space but for other public spaces that are still available on the peninsula. These include our waterfront tours, were looking to create a waterfront plan that could activate these different sites that are underutilized: where we can do urban farms, access points, create awareness around what should be the solutions for a community like ours.

Since then, we have had multiple collaborations with different entities [universities] creating renderings for what the spaces could look like, and now working with design trust for public space, were doing a power and place project, were creating an asset-map that identifies local community assets that we can activate to create our own solutions.

Question/Answer:

1. I live in Bushwick, and there's a Community Garden called BK Rot there. Do you guys collaborate/connect with other organizations across the city?

Mychal Johnson (MJ): One of our gardeners is the president of the Coalition of Community Gardens for New York state. As for the Bronx, yes the various gardens work together in access to supplies, but also because they are facing the threat of displacement, given the housing plan of De Blasio, and before him Bloomberg.

Saara Nafici (SN): Yes, we are part of community gardens coalition, and some of the collaboration is practical, like sharing mulch, for instance. But the other part is connecting people, visiting each other sites (inaudible).

MJ: We're actually stewarding some highway space, you know like the adopt a highway program? Were trying to make these spaces community-centered, not just a fence; Parks has things they can share, like mulch, to make sure the soil is viable; we had some (inaudible) that we could in turn share.

Question: I was wondering how you understand green space creation and farm space creation in relation gentrification? And how one can happen without paving the way for further land speculation?

SN: We have two farm stands. We noticed that one of them was starting to tip toward young white people who just moved to the neighborhood. Some people were even saying "we can make deals!" I say that laughing, but its a delicate conversation. Our young people get the mission, and were trying to get produce out; that's why we opened the new one. In terms of where its located, who wed be working with, the promotions we can do: if you live in NYCHA you get a deal. There's always developers, we work with RH initiative, that works in neighborhood; none of the developers give us money but they do to them. that's the conundrum of the non-profit industrial complex. We need money to pay our young people, to get the seeds to do the work, and they have money they want to spread around...But definitely at the farm stand we see it, everyday. We can see it in the sales, of what we sell at one farm stand or the other. We dont need more kale at this one but not at that one, we need more long beans at this one but not that one.

MJ: Because we created that waterfront plan which received priority status from the state department of environmental conservation's Open Space committee; when we do the tours, people do ask, when you create green space you may see gentrification coming as a result of it...but our argument back to that is that so many folks in our neighborhood have for decades not had any access and they deserve it. Because we are now faced with gent hyper real estate spec; we've created a Statement of Principles for Private Development. We dont take money from private developers, in fact we tell them were showing you what social responsibility looks like. Environmental justice, creating local jobs at a living wage, health equity, cohesion, not creating great divide. We abide by those in our CLT. We know that force is there. When it comes to the Waterfront plans, there are lands adjacent to where we've been planning for decades to create waterfront access, that have just been been bought for 50 million, flipped for 150 million to a much larger developer, and that's happening along the peninsula. We have to be even more steadfast. But the place is being made "acceptable" people think its a hip place to come to because we have arts and culture.

Question: How do you work with people to educate on them on the issues without leading them to despair? Asthma, gentrification, these powerful forces. How do you work...

MJ: Because were organizing our neighbors, who already have kids with asthma, who are already being faced with displaced, so its about organizing them to know there is something we can do. Lets not normalize the situation. There are things we can do. We can learn fro the examples of Williamsburg, Red Hook...

(Unavailable question regarding Fresh Direct campaign):

MJ: We sued and fought, but the city went ahead, and they built the facility. But what we did before they opened up is we partnered with Columbia University and did a traffic/air quality monitoring study along that map I showed you. We monitored for six months before they opened, and now were monitoring again because we have a baseline created in terms of the difference that these 1000 new diesel trucks per day is going to make in terms of all these indicators. We don't really call it a loss, because we brought people together and opened awareness.. Its been going on for decades. Its a long fight. Like We Act. Its about the long struggle and awareness not the numbers. They want to rely on the old numbers Well do a Peoples Environmental Study and the numbers will speak for themselves.

SN: Did Fresh Direct hire?

MJ: They did, but while there is a union amongst the drivers and livery guys whose wages have gone up, most of the workers at the warehouse are making just under/at minimum wage. That's what happens when you get 150 Million subsidy, and you're not held to living wage legislation...they got through that by lobbying with city council...(inaudible). We paid them for each location, gave them all this space (that was documented to be a native American burial ground). Injustice on top of injustice, on top of injustice. If that was public land, how can we make sure more public land doesn't go that route in the future? Had we had a CLT 25 years ago when they leased that land for 99 years, maybe that could have been a community farm. Were not just talking about Fresh Direct, everything built on that land I showed you, its built on public land and it should be providing public benefit, that could create real sustainability in this poor community.

Q: What can you say about what you've learned about engaging with elected officials and existing political institutions, and crossing scales with your work?

SN: We at Value Added have a staff of three. Unless we partner with other groups and entities to pool resources. If its just us what kind of reach do we have if its just us? We have to be working with these others entities to build power. Its about pooling resources and building power.

MJ: Some of the major sponsors of the Fresh Direct development are our local representatives even our borough president whose wife has asthma, yet he was whole heartedly for it. 17 council members received donations from Fresh Direct even while they're walking around with an asthma pump in their pocket. Our mayor talks about Tale of Two Cities, yet we see that term constantly going down. All we can do is form coalitions, face injustices head on, create solutions, make sure we have a plan. Right now, our mayor is trying to build a brand new prison, shut down Rikers and build a new one in Mott Haven. After all this stuff I've talked about, we need a prison now, right? From the ground up, on the land of an old hospital, Lincoln hospital, that was known for its terrible

service, no bilingual service, people dying in the hall ways; but through direct action, groups like Young Lords and the Black Panthers took over the hospital for 24 hours, and that set in motion a whole change; out of that change came the Lincoln Detox Center, where they did acupuncture and reiki instead of methadone for heroin addiction. It is a whole other story, but suffice to say that Detox Center has been around for decades and pioneered this important alternative; we have to continue to fight, how we can create a coalition, be very comprehensive, and have a plan. On the site where they're putting the jail, there is already a community plan for deeply affordable housing by an organization that already has 1300 units of affordable housing owned by the residents a block a way. If you don't have a plan, you end up in the garbage plan. If you're not at the table, you end up being the meal. Have a plan, unity, strong coalitions, have to get people civically engaged, and make sure these elected officials represent us. Far too often they're not, doing it for their own benefits.

Q: Is getting the community to vote a big priority for your organization?

MJ: Were an immigrant community, community of color; have seen so much negative things over and over again that they think their vote doesn't count. But we say no it does count. So we are actively engaged in registration drives...there's a candidate were pushing as individuals (not as nonprofit) get out there and show our strength, that's the only thing that will scare the elected into doing anything.

Ashley: Now pivoting to specific frame of climate action, though its already been present in much of the discussion so far. Could you talk about how working with institutions, including universities works best, you mentioned Columbia for instance. What have the most productive way that other institutions can help draft community based plan that can have some purchase on elected officials?

MJ: We've been partnering with Syracuse, Pratt, we don't turn down any offers to work with students because we think there are answers there, it may not be all at comprehensive, but see what parts can fit. There are so many plans for Mott Haven from Columbia, NYU, Rutgers, you name it, they've all got these ideas...that's all great, maybe there are points in these they we can use. It can be a good service to have students think about about what's going on in these communities that are underserved and overburdened. Looking at planning differently, architecture differently, community input differently, not just a box that you scratch off--that's been a problem you have with climate change. un-resilient waterfronts, food deserts. There has not been equity

SN: I'll be candid. I have only been in Red Hook for three and a half years. It has taken me this long to get a sense of the internal politics of the neighborhood, how that relates to local officials. Like one who bought everyone a new refrigerator in the houses, for instance. Another one you say his name and people will say, "I'm sorry, who?" We work a lot with the tenant associations in east and west Red hook, who don't always get along, and wield power in different ways, aligned in different ways. So speaking personal its taken time to figure out where where we fit in with the neighborhood politics that predate the farm, and my time there. I don't think the farm has been very engaged with Red hook

politics, its been more engaged with farm life around the city, and I dont think that's been to our benefit. Now that I'm getting a better sense of all the different players, figuring out where we play in future of Red Hook in all the areas we've been talking about.

Q: To what extent do the communities you work with frame these racial, economic, locational, environmental health inequalities in terms of climate change? To what extent is that productive? Does it expand your outreach?

SN: Red Hook was underwater without power. And Red Hook organized itself. Red hook initiative became main community hubs. Some of the parents of the youth I know were main community organizers. There's now a resiliency core of trained emergency responders, and thinking about what it looks like to rebuild in Red Hook, very tied to climate change. That being said, there is a huge amount of housing being built, and the people who were rebuilding after Sandy have not been part of that conversation. By and large the families d community; there is an understanding of climate change, but also climate change denial in the sense that were still here, and doing a lot of the same things. I know the science. I have two kids and live in New York City. And yet every day I do engage in a certain denial, just so we dont get to that despair point that was mentioned earlier. So it can be helpful but sometimes not.

MJ: After Sandy, the communities that were heavily impacted got attention with mitigation plans, but the communities that were not, no mitigation directed at them. There's the big U downtown. There doing a plan for Hunts Point market because they want to protect that food resource for the Northeastern region. But as far as our community, the only one is the one we've created with our waterfront plan--which pre-dates Sandy. We did it primarily for recreational and access opportunities but also the permeable surface we've proposed, that has implications for mitigation. There have not been any action points that local officials have taken, we've done it ourselves. Spreading awareness about the peninsula looks like, its dilapidation, and has no mitigation measures prepared. If you were here during Sandy, you know half of Manhattan was dark because of 14th street, the station exploded with sea water. Transit stations on waterfront in Port Morris. Those communities go in the dark in a storm, there's no plan for it. So that's why we need to come in with that plan. Waste treatment stations, fossil fuel power plants, even medical waste transfer stations. All that would be dumped on us. How do we prepare? There is no preparedness. Were constantly meeting with elected officials about what's going on here...We have the example of Sandy (?) it would be harder if there were no examples, but we do have them.

Q: Given the often frustrating situation with elected officials can you talk about the role of direct action? And how does that relate to the project of taking over spaces, and eventually setting up a CLT? Also, has the CLT been fully set up, or what is its status?

MJ: The CLT has been incorporated for three years. The CLT's main focus is as a nonprofit is owning or stewarding land, public or private land, to create an opportunity for deeply affordable housing or community space; as far as our coalition partners like

South Bronx United who are *part of* the CLT, we do direct action by acts of civil disobedience putting ourselves on the line to get our point across, saying things have to change, even going to jail from protesting a city council person is necessary to put forth the message that were tired...top trying to create solutions by doing the same thing over and over again.

Q: So with the CLT, are there pieces of property that you have indeed taken back, that you are stewarding?

MJ: Yes, we are stewarding the Adopt a Highway Space; we've finished our feasibility study for the Hart Center; the building is now vacant; the site of the Lincoln detox center, the city has given permission for us to take our feasibility team in, engineers, architects .

Q: Its worth taking a step back and thinking about how that earlier NYC plans to make the city green and resilience have involved a neoliberal approach to the ownership of land and fighting gentrification; so giving developers rights to build higher buildings if they set aside a certain amount of affordable housing

MJ: Or green space!

Q: Including even community farms, a kind of bait and switch. So the CLT plans are quite radical, its kind of anti-capitalist...

MJ: Socialism: community owned space. Socialism. Come on Ashley, you've got to say it! (room laughs)

Q: I'll say it!

MJ: Uh oh we've got a camera going!

Q: It's about taking land off the market.

MJ: Its a force against speculation. It takes it off the market and puts it in the hands of the community. Not an individual, not an LLC, not just a land trust. A community land trust. Without the C, its not a CLT.

SN: Even with the Farm we have a three year license, all community gardens have to renegotiate [interruption of tape]. The city put out a list of community properties, an interminable list of properties, and required communities to come forth and say no take it off.

MJ: That's why you have to organize, organize, organize, because the next time your name is on the list and you dont have community backing it, they can take it!