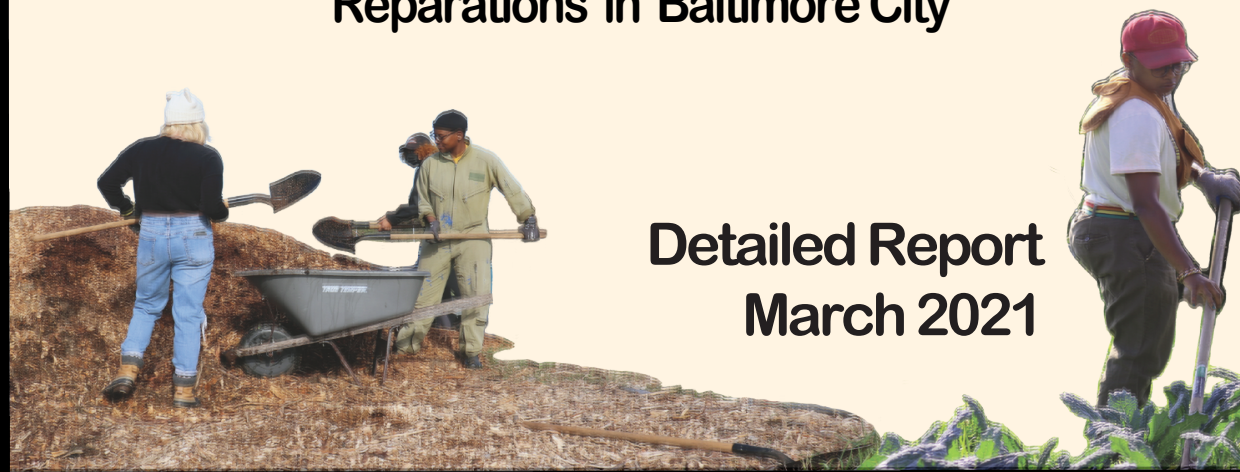


# Community Control of Land

The People's Demand for Land  
Reparations in Baltimore City

Detailed Report  
March 2021



Prepared By

*Black Yield*



**FAB**

# Acknowledgements

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The Black Yield Institute and Farm Alliance of Baltimore would like to recognize the contributions of the many community members who came together to make this report possible.

Our fruitful and fascinating teach ins would not have been possible without facilitation from Malik Yakini, Zachary Murray, Zachari Curtis, and Kirtrina Baxter. We would like to offer them thanks for the knowledge and insight they shared with our attendees.

Thank you also to our intern, Joey Lichten, who used the wisdom, knowledge, demands, and hopes shared by our community members in community listening sessions to draft this report.

The community conversations and the body of community wisdom produced would not exist without the earnest engagement and leadership of our conversation facilitators: Rodette Jones, Sha'Von Terrell, Lee Jordan Jr., Denzel Mitchell, and Aleya Fraser. We would like to offer thanks for the guidance you provided our community as we discussed this historically complex topic.

Finally, we would like to thank every member of the resilient and brilliant community of thinkers and movers who attended our listening sessions over the course of the fall of 2020. Policy change in the field of food systems and land management does not usually happen from the grassroots up. The participation of community members and the courage and thoughtfulness you demonstrated has made this historic process possible. Thank you for entrusting us with facilitating this foundational work. We will control the land!

- Eric Jackson, Servant-Director, Black Yield Institute
- Mariya Strauss, Executive Director, Farm Alliance of Baltimore





# Project Summary

## Overview

Black Yield Institute (BYI) is a Pan-African power building and social movement organization, serving as a think tank and collective action network that addresses food apartheid and builds movement toward Black Land & Food Sovereignty. BYI works collaboratively with black people and entities, along with other institutions, in pursuit of Black Land and Food Sovereignty. BYI is building independent power by establishing an action network and serving as an incubator for ideas and projects.

The Farm Alliance of Baltimore (FAB) is a membership organization of urban farms, neighborhood growers, and friends. FAB uses connection, resource sharing, and collective advocacy with respect to food, land and water to expand communities' self-determination and power.

**Black Yield Institute & Farm Alliance of Baltimore co-led a community-driven series of virtual conversations and teach-ins in October 2020. This political process was designed to engage community members in defining major issues around, and proposing solutions to the issue of community land-access insecurity. The aim is to develop a community self-determined proposal for shifting land within the City of Baltimore.**

The project was born out of a collective recognition that food and land use policy change in Baltimore is not usually charted through authen-

tic community engagement. Our goal is to reorient our community to engaging in the democratic promise of representation. We hope that the process and the findings of this project and report will mark a new practice of securing reparatory policies that repair relationships between Black and Brown farmers, growers, Baltimore citizens and our land.

## Methodology

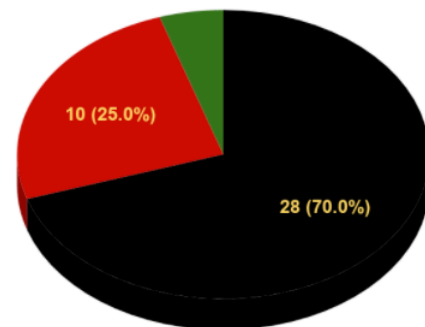
### Approaches to Outreach:

- Community Listservs/Newsletters
- Social Media
- Word of Mouth
- Personal Emails

### Number of Conversations: 11

- 1 Preliminary Community Dialogue (June 2020)
- 1 Teach-in (October 2020)
- 9- Community Conversations (October 2020)
- Total Participants: Approx. 100

Community Control of Land Community Conversations  
Attendee Demographic Breakdown by Location



● Baltimore City ● Counties in MD ● Outside of MD

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### ***Teach-Ins:***

Recruitment of Experts: Black Yield Institute recruited four experts from people’s movements in Oakland, Washington DC, Philadelphia, and Detroit who have won victories on community control of land. These experts were invited to share learnings from their specific experiences in a single 90 minute public conversation with Baltimore City residents. As the goal was to use these experts’ input to inform our community conversations, the teach-in was held before the facilitated community conversations.

### ***Attendee Recruitment and Outreach:***

Farm Alliance of Baltimore and Black Yield Institute ran a joint communications campaign to publicize the teach-in, which took place Oct. 6, 2020. Farm Alliance of Baltimore collected contact information and communicated directly with those registering for the event, and prepared a virtual space for holding and recording the event. Attendees were then re-contacted for participation in the community conversations.

*“The people that are most affected by decisions [around land ownership] should be able to make those decisions, and the people who [experience] the most consequence, or benefit, or impact from resources should be able to control those resources.”*

*- T., Baltimore*

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## ***Community Perspectives on Land Use***

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Members of all community listening sessions expressed an interest in community access to empty, agriculturally appropriate land in their neighborhoods. Community members believe that access to land is a human right, and that their current state of inaccess is a violation of said right. In addition, participants across focus groups believed that access to a plot of communally owned land would create significant economic, public health, safety, and quality of life improvement potentials for their neighborhood.

Participants offered up the idea of communally owned land as a viable community-strengthening alternative to speculation and corporate-led development, which has historically led to gentrification and further exacerbation of wealth inequality for Black and poor Baltimoreans.

Residents strongly assert that it is the city government’s duty to protect the rights of Baltimore citizens, and as such the City Government should be accountable in protecting community

access to land from speculation and predatory development, and in supporting communities through capital and resources as they develop their community controlled land.

- ***Community expresses strong interest in growing food, livestock, and fibers within Baltimore City.***

- \* All communities have multiple members/organizations that are interested and invested in the idea of urban agriculture.
- \* Most participants believe community member interest and participation in a community controlled land project would increase once it became apparent that the community had true, unfettered access and control of said land.
- \* Community members interviewed came from every region in Baltimore City (North East, North West, West, South-west, and East Baltimore), reflecting a city wide interest in this potential project.

- ***The people communicate that access to arable land is a human right and the limitation of community control of land represents a violation of this right.***

- \* Some participants observe that wealthy, white communities have greater access (than poor, Black, and Latinx communities) to land, government support, and government sanction when growing on unoccupied land.
- \* Community members understand that land is inaccessible for poor and/or Black and Latinx communities because of the

city's history of redlining, and more recently the city's pursuit of racist, neoliberal style development plans that exclude and/or prey on black communities.

- \* Community also expressed that a general lack of knowledge/information in Black and poor communities limits citizens' invocation of their rights to work land in their neighborhood.
- \* Some people also asserted that the city's history of preying on land in Black/Brown neighborhoods, breaking agreements, criminalizing Black people for working the land, or putting up barriers to black ownership of land:
  - ◇ The current program "Adopt-a-Lot" is an example of a program presenting no path to ownership.
- \* Conversations about inequities in ownership were raised and several salient points were raised:
  - ◇ Ownership is important to getting community buy-in on urban agriculture. Without some form of ownership, there is the constant threat that the land will be taken away.
  - ◇ Financial burden of purchasing land, paying insurance, paying taxes makes ownership inaccessible.
  - ◇ Polluted soil in red-lined areas (results of environmental racism) makes land unsafe to cultivate unless soil is brought in (additional cost).

***Why should I invest if I don't know what's going to happen to the [land]? A garden or farm takes...a lifetime to develop, and it's for the generations. That's why we do it; we plant seeds for multiple generations."***

***- J. B., Baltimore***

# *Reparatory Policy Recommendations:*

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1. *City land, especially city land obtained through mortgage default or seizure, should be given to communities at no cost or sold to communities at a rate below market value.*
  - a. **Every neighborhood in the city should have access to a minimum of one or two acres of arable land.**
    - i. The city should be responsible for testing soils to determine the extent of the lots' safety for community agricultural use.
    - ii. Distribution of available land should be determined through a "percentage" model for deeding safe, vacant land over to the community:
      - For example, 10%-50% of all vacant land in the city OR some percentage of vacant land in each community deeded over.
      - Utilize a screening process that prioritizes neighborhoods that need land the most (and are most blighted, most neglected by the city).
      - Neighborhoods considered Healthy Food Priority Areas should receive a larger proportion of the available land in their community.
    - iii. Another option for the city is to designate all vacant land to the community members in the community where the land is currently unoccupied.
  - b. **City agencies should render no-cost land acquisition to Black communities as a form of reparations for the residual effects of redlining.**
    - i. This is the one feasible way to ensure that structures of inequality and inequitable distribution of capital across neighborhoods do not reproduce unequal access to land during a land acquisition process.
    - ii. Removing the financial barrier to community ownership for Black communities is also a practical way to ensure that Black communities can focus what resources they do have on the startup costs of farming, and give them a greater opportunity to generate wealth intergenerationally.
  - c. **Purchasing the land through traditional ownership practices (transfer of deed in exchange for money) is an option that allows for land to support "no-strings" relationships between growers and city agencies.**
    - i. By paying property taxes, farmers will have a high claim to city services/engagement/protection.
    - ii. If land is purchased from the city, it should be sold at a highly discounted price.

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**d. City should prioritize permanent ownership of community controlled land rather than other models like leasing and adoption/permitting.**

- i. Community members expressed across focus groups that cooperatives and land trusts are the most viable models to provide a strong and resilient organizational structure to preserve permanent land ownership and permanent use of said land for agriculture. Supporting this community preference towards cooperative or trust ownership necessitates changes to city zoning code to explicitly protect cooperatively owned land/property.
- ii. Some participants also expressed interest in utilizing non-stock corporation status to cooperatively own and manage land.
- iii. Community members believe that traditional individual ownership for Black families and community organizations that can afford it should also be considered as a viable option.

**e. Alternative models of exchange, not including financial capital, must also be considered by the City as compensation for land:**

- i. Sweat equity and continued stewardship.
- ii. Reduction of pressure on city infrastructure.
- iii. Environmental, health, and community safety improvements.

**2. *City and community must build concrete structures to support and protect community land control from the force of predatory capitalism that is causing gentrification in Baltimore City.***

**a. Multiple focus groups emphasized the need for lasting legislative change to protect community controlled land that cannot change with newly elected administrations.**

- i. Legislative change must create a new, flexible category of community cooperative ownership that is complete, accessible and protected:
  - Zoning reform to create a category of permanent ownership that isn't dependent on a deed held in one person/LLC/organization's name.
    - ◊ Drawing on a stewardship, cooperative, CLT, or indigenous kind of model as opposed to an individual responsibility and ownership structure.
  - Amendment to real estate law/code that allows collective ownership while also accounting for liability and insurance burdens.
- ii. Amendment to current city programming and charters that would make land transfer to the community and said new form of community land control permanent.
  - Protect land designated for growing from city repurchase or private, corporate development.



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- Law should require vacant lot only be transferred to people/groups who have lived in the community for a longer period of time, to protect against gentrification and development.
  - i. Develop short term policy projects to support development of community controlled land.
    - Policy should include city grant programs or short term funding for public outreach programs, to facilitate awareness of new laws (as proposed in this report) with citizens.
  - b. City must provide financial and material support to communities so that they can develop community controlled land. Some pathways are as follows:**
    - i. Portion of city budget devoted to urban agriculture and food production.
    - ii. Tax credits, property tax freeze, or no property tax on community controlled land.
    - iii. Stipend or even salary fund to encourage full time employment and prevent labor shortages on farms and gardens.
    - iv. Subsidies for building infrastructure.
      - Infrastructure might include: tools; imported soil, wood, and fencing; on site refrigeration; electrical hookups; water lines and irrigation; or whatever a community needs for that particular space.
    - v. Capital to support costs of certifications and insurance.
    - vi. Limited administrative/organizational involvement.
      - Facilitating communication between urban agriculture projects.
      - Encouraging Baltimore City institutions like schools, hospitals, etc to purchase food from community controlled farms.
  - c. Support the creation of a coalition or network of community actors, including organizations, companies and citizens, across city neighborhoods that work together to ensure land protection, knowledge sharing, tangible resources and produce, and share capital.**
    - i. Community members envision such a network as being led by the community but supported by city government outreach and communications.
    - ii. Should be the citizen enforcement and overview entity for the land reparations process.
      - Streamline the process of acquisition, to include activities like application review for land transfers, facilitate day-to-day process of reparations.



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- Create a separation from the city government, and thus be more accountable to the community's actual desires.
  - Ensure that proprietary control over land in question does not fall prey to speculators or reproduce inequities in access.

**d. City and DPW must make water and sanitation services easily accessible and affordable to community controlled land ventures. Some possible tactics for achieving this goal include:**

- i. Create new water usage classification for urban agriculture operations, with a reduced, flat rate that takes into account beneficial effects of urban agriculture on city spending.
- ii. Establish tax credits to make up for water costs.
- iii. Subsidize or pay for water lines.
- iv. Institute policy prohibiting any cut off of water supply for community land projects.
- v. Develop city-supported efforts for rainwater catchment.

**3. Establish flexible land use options in accordance with the diversity of needs identified by communities:**

- a. Project must recognize other ideas, like parks, green spaces, or affordable housing as valid uses of land. **Community desires/needs should be put first.**
- b. Reject profit/time based measurements of success when determining who stewards the land.
- c. Develop a proposal and agenda that is flexible enough to accommodate multiple land use styles.
- d. Consider community needs and consider land use for citizens that do not reside in a particular community.

*“Baltimore does this thing I’ve coined ‘civic’ sharecropping. It asks, or cajoles, or demands that Black and Brown communities do the things that the City should doing with our tax dollars... folks should be getting paid for their time and their ingenuity.”*

*- N. N., Baltimore*

# Glossary of Terms

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- **Food Apartheid - Structural oppression based on race and class** that limits access to power and resources related to food and land.

**Food apartheid is a result of the systematic destruction of Black self determination** to control our food, whether by exclusion from agriculture industries, lack of access to arable lands and healthy foods, predatory marketing and capitalism, or other blatant or subtle racist and discriminatory food systems.

**The inequity of food apartheid is marked by segregation, extreme and concentrated health problems, and low rates of land ownership.** <sup>1</sup>

- **Food Sovereignty** - Food sovereignty is 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.** <sup>2</sup>
- **Black Land & Food Sovereignty** - a movement building approach to addressing food apartheid affecting Black or African peoples through Food Sovereignty tactics that build power and restore connections to the earth, living beings, and cultural practices. Action tactics are centered on building political, economic, and social power, resulting in the control of capital and other resources. **Black Land & Food Sovereignty** asserts an analysis and stance toward equity and away from colonialistic practices that perpetuate imbalances in access and ownership of land and food resources
- **Sweat Equity** - An exchange of community benefit, control, and/or access to a project in return for the non-monetary value that community members generate through their time, labor, and engagement with said project.
- **Community Control of Land** - Any formation of land control where a community is legally recognized as having full, un-mediated decision making power over the land in question. The land is controlled and used collectively instead of by a individual, and decisions regarding land use are decided democratically as opposed to unilaterally.
- **Land Reparations** - a reparations framework that **demands the US government (federal, state, and local) address its historical and contemporary involvement in the root cause of food apartheid** - the legacy of slavery and dispossession of Black owned land - through **redistribution of wealth, resource, and arable land to Black communities.**

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1 Working concept adapted from the National Black Food and Justice Alliance

2 Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007

Black Yield



[www.blackyieldinstitute.org](http://www.blackyieldinstitute.org)

Facebook: @BlackYieldInstitute

Instagram: @blackyield

Twitter: @BlackYield

Email: [info@blackyieldinstitute.org](mailto:info@blackyieldinstitute.org)



**FAB**

[www.farmalliancebaltimore.org](http://www.farmalliancebaltimore.org)

Facebook: @farmalliance

Instagram: @farmalliancebaltimore

Email: [info@farmalliancebaltimore.org](mailto:info@farmalliancebaltimore.org)