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(Food) Justice in the Interim? Temporary Urban Gardening, Welfare Activation, and Plural Valuation

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Abstract

Across European cities, temporary urban gardening is used to address vacancy, sustainability, and social inclusion. Yet little is known about how justice is enacted when such initiatives are embedded in welfare and labor-market activation policies. This article examines a publicly funded urban gardening project in Dortmund, Germany, implemented as a labor-market activation measure on temporarily available land targeting employable welfare recipients. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the study combines the concept of "food justice" with valuation studies to analyze how labor, land, and exchange are valued in everyday practice. Rather than using food justice as a normative benchmark, the article explores how notions of justice are produced and negotiated through institutional frameworks, daily routines, and actors' evaluative judgments. The findings reveal tensions between empowerment and dependency, care and control, and social recognition and material precarity. While participants experience gardening as meaningful work and a source of social participation and belonging, these valuations remain bounded by welfare regulations, temporary land tenure, and charity-based forms of food distribution. The article argues that temporary urban gardening projects function as spaces of plural and negotiated valuation, where justice is enacted provisionally through everyday practices, contributing to debates on temporary urban land use, food practices under welfare governance, and the limits of inclusion-oriented sustainability interventions.

Keywords

food justice; justice; social labor policy; temporary land use; urban agriculture; urban gardening; valuation studies; values; welfare activation; work opportunity

1. Introduction

Across European cities, temporary uses of vacant urban land—from pop-up parks to urban gardening—have become emblematic tools of urban transformation. Promoted as creative, sustainable, and participatory responses to vacancy, such initiatives promise to do more with less under conditions of spatial scarcity (Altrock, 2024; Galdini, 2020). Increasingly, social and therapeutic agricultural projects mobilize food cultivation to promote empowerment and inclusion among vulnerable groups, while relying on scarce and often temporary land (Guirado et al., 2017). As spatio-temporally anchored places, urban gardens reanimate fallow spaces while reshaping everyday relations to land. In these spaces, questions of who participates, who benefits, and on what terms become tangible. Urban gardens thus foreground justice-related questions at the intersection of social policy, sustainability, and planning.

The case examined here is a publicly co-funded gardening initiative in Dortmund, Germany, located on a temporarily available plot originally reserved for road infrastructure. Created within a labor-market activation program, it offers welfare recipients a structured work opportunity through collective food production. It aligns with municipal goals of sustainability, social inclusion, and creative land reuse, forming a hybrid intervention at the crossroads of welfare policy, urban development, and food initiatives.

How these institutional aims translate into practice becomes visible in everyday routines. On weekday mornings, participants arrive at the fenced plot on the city's edge, change into work clothes, and tend raised beds—planting, watering, and harvesting vegetables later shared or donated. Gardening is not a hobby but part of a welfare measure: Work is scheduled and supervised, yet shaped by seasonal rhythms, bodily capacities, and deliberations over effort, care, and fairness.

Scholarship shows that initiatives like this operate within overlapping logics of governance and value, navigating between neoliberal rationalities and transformative aims, and between material interventions in space and the cultivation of social and ecological relations (Barry et al., 2025; Horst et al., 2017; Tornaghi, 2016). Read through this lens, the practices of gardening, work, and care described above unfold within a fluid terrain in which justice emerges in provisional and contested forms, shaped through ongoing compromises and adaptations.

Food justice remains an emergent and conceptually unsettled field in the German context, discussed by relatively few scholars (e.g., Hoinle & Klosterkamp, 2023) and referenced only sporadically in policy documents, sustainability reports, and local food strategies. Despite the growth of urban gardening in Germany, few studies connect these initiatives to food-justice debates, particularly where they intersect with labor-market or welfare policies. Production-oriented gardening initiatives that engage marginalized groups remain underexamined, and long-term unemployed people are largely absent from research on nature-based agri-food interventions (García-Llorente et al., 2018). This gap separates food-justice scholarship from the institutional realities of publicly funded projects.

The aim of this article is to examine how justice-related notions are enacted, negotiated, and constrained in a temporary urban gardening project embedded in labor-market activation policy, and how understandings of what counts as just and fair emerge through everyday valuation practices. Using food justice as a sensitizing framework, the analysis focuses on how labor, land, and exchange are valued. Rather than assessing the project

against a normative benchmark, the study investigates how justice is constructed in ongoing interactions. It examines how participants, instructors, and institutions enact justice in everyday practices within broader welfare and food-system arrangements.

Building on valuation studies, the article conceptualizes justice not as a fixed standard but as constituted through situated practices of valuation. From this perspective, worth is made to count through judgments, comparisons, and institutional framings, rather than assumed as a stable property (Heinich, 2020a, 2025). This approach aligns with recent planning scholarship that emphasizes the moral and spatial dimensions of valuation in urban settings (Bongers-Römer & Bakunowitsch, in press; Lake, 2024). Justice is thus understood as plural and contested (Stumpf et al., 2016), taking shape through different valuation frames—such as institutional, practical, and moral reasoning—that delineate what is considered fair or legitimate in temporary urban spaces.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Urban Gardening and Temporary Land Use

Urban gardens are widely discussed as contributors to sustainable urban development and resilience, combining green spaces with environmental, socio-cultural, and food-related functions (Barthel et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Embedded in broader urban processes, they are shaped by neoliberal governance logics and shifting policy agendas, which generate inherent tensions rather than straightforward limitations. Scholars have highlighted contributions to green gentrification (Cucca et al., 2023) as well as tensions between participation, care, and unpaid or unevenly accessible forms of work, particularly where voluntary labor fosters care and inclusion yet remains unpaid and largely accessible only to those with sufficient temporal resources (McClintock, 2014; Rosol, 2012).

As a spatially effective practice, urban gardening is embedded in and actively shapes public spaces (Certomà et al., 2019; Milbourne, 2021). While planning scholarship widely acknowledges temporary urban uses (Chang, 2021; Madanipour, 2018), temporality in urban gardening research often remains implicit. Drake and Lawson (2014) explicitly engage temporality by tracing the historical discourses that shaped the common assumption of urban gardening as a temporary activity on land labeled "vacant" in US cities, framing it as an unusual, short-term land use serving specific purposes. The authors argue that this view normalizes community gardens as interim uses of vacant land, reinforcing their instrumental valuation within sustainability planning—a logic mirrored in planning frameworks that mobilize temporary uses as sustainability instruments (Chen & Yen, 2025).

Among the temporal dimensions at play, temporary land use arrangements in urban gardening are both enabling—providing access and opportunities—and structurally constraining due to impermanence and uncertainty, including the need to repeatedly establish soil, infrastructure, and practices (Demailly & Darly, 2017; McCann et al., 2023). Building on this, McCann et al. (2023) introduce the notion of *impermaculture* as an approach through which urban growers adapt to and work with the temporary nature of available land.

Furthermore, while temporality is rarely theorized in relation to justice concerns, Kotsila et al. (2020) show how *clashing temporalities* of care reveal justice implications, particularly between the slower, relational

timeframes of gardens and the faster, efficiency-oriented timelines of institutions and development. Feminist scholarship similarly engages these dynamics but shifts attention toward the gendered organization of care work, emphasizing its reliance on unpaid or underpaid labor linked to social reproduction and ethics of care (Braga Bizarria et al., 2022; Martin, 2019). This literature highlights how such practices are systematically devalued, contributing to a framing of community gardens as spaces of social reproduction rather than economically "serious" activity, and helping to explain their marginal position within policy regimes oriented toward productivity, efficiency, and growth.

Insights from this literature underscore that valuation and justice dynamics in urban gardening unfold within governance logics that privilege efficiency, measurability, and productivity; temporary use is therefore not a neutral planning mechanism but part of the wider interplay between governance, sustainability, and justice agendas. In this context, urban gardening embodies an inherently in-between condition (Classens, 2015; McClintock, 2014; Nikolaidou et al., 2016; Tornaghi, 2016).

2.2. Food Justice

Food justice emerged in North American scholarship and activism linking environmental and racial justice, alternative food movements, and food studies, and has since developed into a heterogeneous and contested analytical field (Alkon, 2018; Alkon & Agyeman, 2025; Dixon, 2014; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2013). Rooted in community-based struggles against racial and economic inequities, early food-justice debates focused primarily on consumption and unequal access to healthy food. More recent scholarship emphasizes how justice is defined, enacted, and contested within food systems more broadly, shifting attention from outcomes alone to the practices and relations through which inequalities are produced and addressed (de Bruin et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2023).

Scholars increasingly argue for an analytical approach that traces how different notions of justice materialize in specific contexts (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015; de Bruin et al., 2024). This perspective highlights the interpretive flexibility of food justice and its sensitivity to place, governance arrangements, and everyday practices. While much of the literature remains US-focused, recent research has turned to European contexts, identifying land access and tenure as key sites of inequality, particularly for marginalized groups (Coulson & Milbourne, 2021; Horst et al., 2021).

Food-justice scholarship distinguishes several interrelated dimensions of justice, most commonly distributive, procedural, and recognitional. These address the allocation of resources such as food, land, and labor; the fairness of participation and decision-making processes; and the recognition of marginalized groups as legitimate subjects of justice (de Bruin et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2023). Scholars also extend this framework to additional dimensions (e.g., epistemic, capability-based, restorative, intergenerational, ecological), underscoring its evolving and plural character. Urban gardening has become a key empirical site for exploring these debates.

Cadieux and Slocum (2015) conceptualize food justice as transformative change across four interconnected nodes: trauma/inequity, exchange, land, and labor. Building on this framework, this study uses food justice as a sensitizing analytical lens rather than a prescriptive model. Focusing on labor, land, and exchange, it examines how valuations, including inequalities, materialize in a temporary urban gardening project and how

justice is actively constructed, constrained, and contested in institutional and everyday contexts. This approach foregrounds participants' perspectives and highlights how power relations are worked through in practice, beyond simplified dichotomies of power and subordination (Hochedez, 2022).

2.3. Valuation Studies

Discussions of justice in the food system are inseparable from processes of valuation, i.e., how certain practices, actors, or relations come to be regarded as valuable or just. As de Bruin et al. (2024) observe, principles of justice express specific values shaped by the ways food is conceived, e.g., as a right, a common good, or a commodity. Extending the food-justice perspective, this study draws on valuation studies to trace how multiple and sometimes conflicting valuations of justice are enacted in practice.

Food-justice scholars have critically highlighted how audit cultures and neoliberal monitoring shape which forms of justice are rendered visible and accountable (Cadieux & Slocum, 2015). From a valuation perspective, tools of measurement, assessment, and justification are never neutral; they actively construct what counts as legitimate contribution or success (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Heinich, 2020a). Justice principles thus function as evaluative devices through which abstract values are translated into judgments about concrete practices and claims (de Bruin et al., 2024). Valuation studies provide an analytical vocabulary for tracing how these judgments are made, stabilized, and contested.

Instead of treating value as a stable property, valuation studies conceptualize valuation as a situated, relational, and performative process through which actors ascribe worth and legitimacy (Heinich, 2020b, 2025; Lamont, 2012). This perspective is particularly suited to analyzing contexts where multiple evaluative logics coexist, such as welfare-based urban gardening projects that combine social policy, environmental goals, and temporary land use. Building on pragmatist traditions (Dewey, 1939), valuation is understood as an ongoing accomplishment—a process of meaning-making shaped by context and interaction. It is embedded in social relations, institutional frameworks, and material arrangements, revealing broader hierarchies of worth and moral order.

Here, the concept of valuation complements the food justice lens, redirecting attention from what is valued to how valuation unfolds in practice. This study draws specifically on Heinich's (2020a) framework, which distinguishes between valuation by measurement, valuation by attachment, and valuation by judgment. While all three modes are present, the empirical material primarily reveals judgment-based valuation, which the analysis foregrounds—moments when actors compare, justify, and assess what counts as fair, meaningful, or appropriate in relation to work, land, or exchange. Focusing on judgment allows the analysis to show how everyday moral judgments and institutional metrics operate as patterns of valuation that stabilize particular interpretations of justice, even under conditions of temporality and welfare governance.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018) grounded in a social constructivist perspective (Jones, 2002). Fieldwork was conducted between 2021 and 2022 during the project's establishment phase, allowing observation of how goals, values, and institutional logics were formed and negotiated in real time. Pandemic-related restrictions occasionally constrained participation and observation.

The dataset comprises 10 semi-structured interviews with participants, project staff, and representatives from the municipal administration and the public employment agency, 12 participant observations of everyday work, meetings, and events, and 15 supplementary documents, including funding applications, reports, and policy frameworks. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized; all interview excerpts quoted in this article were translated by the author. Interview references use an internal coding system (I + number).

Interview participants were recruited during participant observation once familiarity and trust had been established. Selection of project participants was shaped by relationships built during fieldwork and participants' willingness to engage within the mandatory program context, resulting in interviews that primarily reflect more outspoken or actively involved perspectives. Recruiting interviewees proved challenging in some cases due to hesitations about participating, and one scheduled interview did not take place due to participant dropout. The researcher's presence also shaped the field: Early note-taking was perceived as unsettling and was discontinued in favor of retrospective fieldnotes to reduce reactivity. Positionality was further addressed through memo-writing and comparison across interviews, observations, and documents.

Data analysis followed a two-stage qualitative coding process using MAXQDA and principles of qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). In the first coding round, the material was structured through thematic categories informed by the food justice framework, particularly labor, land, and exchange, alongside codes capturing perceived strengths and weaknesses of the project from different actor perspectives and an "in-between" category for ambiguous or cross-cutting observations. In a second analytical step, these coded segments were revisited with a specific focus on valuation practices, including inequality-related issues.

Drawing on valuation studies, the analysis examined how actors evaluated, compared, and justified practices and arrangements within these themes. Empirical indicators of valuation included evaluative language (e.g., meaningful/pointless, fair/unfair), comparative judgments (e.g., effort, contribution, compensation), explicit justifications of institutional rules, embodied and non-verbal practices observed during everyday interactions, and assessments regarding work, land use, and exchange. Analytical memos were used to trace patterns across actor groups and to examine how judgments were embedded in institutional frameworks, everyday routines, and specific rationalities.

Methodologically, this approach is well-suited to analyzing how valuation practices are articulated and enacted within the project. Semi-structured interviews were designed to explore actors' assessments of strengths, weaknesses, and tensions within the project, while participant observation enabled analysis of valuation practices as they unfolded in everyday interactions. Document analysis provided additional insights into institutional frameworks, enabling triangulation between expressed judgments, observed practices, and formalized institutional valuations.

4. Case Study Introduction

In the Ruhr region, 37% of the land area is agricultural, making urban agriculture the most significant component of the region's green infrastructure (Häpke, 2020). In Dortmund, gardening has long been part of urban life: from historical workers' gardens for subsistence to allotment gardens for recreation and

ecological engagement (Steinborn, 2011). Though initiatives combining food cultivation and social policy are rare, exemplary cases do exist (Regionalverband Ruhr, 2020). Over the past decade, Dortmund has integrated urban gardening into development strategies, exploring its socio-ecological potential. This case unfolds against this local background.

Dortmund's municipal agenda slowly but increasingly recognizes food as a planning issue, as reflected in the 2021 climate change action program, which defined food and agriculture as independent fields of action. Related efforts, including the local food council and emerging research projects, further embed food in urban governance. These developments have gained momentum ahead of the International Garden Exhibition (IGA) 2027, a major regional development event positioning the municipality of Dortmund as a key local actor in the implementation of the event. In this context, the city increasingly mobilizes urban gardening as a tool for sustainability and territorial branding, embedding food-related initiatives within municipal policy and reflecting growing institutional attention to the socio-ecological dimensions of food.

The analyzed project is not a classic food justice initiative—food justice is neither an explicit aim nor linked to an agenda for systemic change. Yet elements of food justice are implicitly present. Although formally designed to promote employment and reduce welfare dependency, the project can reproduce existing dependencies and further social inequalities. Following Cadieux and Slocum's (2015) notion of food justice as a continuum, the case provides an exploratory setting in which these dimensions are negotiated through practice. The analysis centers on individual-level enactments rather than on broader societal valuations of food.

The project is referred to here by the pseudonym Urban Harvest. Urban food production is linked to a labor-market activation scheme (*Arbeitsgelegenheit*, AGH) regulated under §16d of the German Social Code Book II (SGB II). Table 1 summarizes the program's institutional framework at the time of data collection.

Table 1. Overview of AGH as a publicly funded work scheme.

Legal basis	§16d SGB II
Target group	Women, welfare recipients (many long-term unemployed)
Purpose	Employability & social (re)integration, transition into employment
Status	Welfare recipients in a publicly funded work scheme (no labor-law employment)
Work duration	Six-month contracts, extendable up to 36 months; ≤ 30 h/week
Compensation	ca. €2/hour additional expense allowance (not a wage; no effect on benefits)
Participation	May be mandatory under welfare rules, with (limited) preference matching
Sanctions	Non-compliance can lead to welfare sanctions, during study largely suspended/rare

The project brings together actors from the municipal administration, the local employment agency (*Jobcenter*), a non-profit organization serving as the implementing body, and the participants themselves (German-speaking local women), all of whom pursue distinct yet overlapping aims. Table 2 summarizes these groups' main goals and functions. Their differing evaluative orientations co-define what counts as success, fairness, and purpose within the project.

Daily interactions are shaped by both practical demands and normative questions about how social inclusion, ecological practice, and institutional requirements can be aligned. Instead of following a unified program, the project operates as a site where labor-market, social, and urban-sustainability agendas intersect, forming the evaluative backdrop against which food justice aspects such as work and food itself acquire meaning.

Table 2. Actor groups: Goals and functions.

Actor group	Main goals/rationales	Functions/roles
Participants	Assigned by Jobcenter; participation fulfills welfare obligations; occasional personal interest in gardening, social contact, or daily structure	Build and maintain garden; participate in daily work routines
Non-profit implementing organization (staff/instructors, management)	Support vulnerable groups; promote social inclusion, respect, and empowerment through work and learning	Implement the publicly funded measure; organize and manage the project; supervise participants; develop garden as productive and social space
City of Dortmund	Advance social inclusion and sustainable urban development (linked to SDGs 8, 11, and 12); position local food initiatives as part of the city's sustainability agenda	Provide land and funding for the build-up phase; accompany implementation and coordinate the project's integration into municipal programs and sustainability politics
Jobcenter	Reinforce employability and transitions to employment under §16d SGB II	Finance AGH; assign participants; support, monitor outcomes, and assess employability progress
Local food bank	Support local food redistribution and social assistance by collecting (unsold) food and distributing it to people in need	Receive donated organic produce for redistribution
Local community	Foster local cooperation and access to fresh, locally produced food; engage with the garden as a shared community space	Participate in educational activities, events, and citizen engagement; act as users, customers, or cooperation partners

5. Results

5.1. Justice Between Opportunities and Fairness

Among project managers, funders, and municipal representatives involved in Urban Harvest, justice is primarily understood as equality of opportunity. In this governance-oriented perspective, justice is less about redistribution than about enabling social participation through structured work. One instructor critically reflected on this framing, noting that moving towards social justice would require the participants to gain steering power within the project, which would need to be "more open and accessible so everyone can participate" (I9), implicitly acknowledging the project's selective design, in which access and decision-making remain institutionally bounded.

This opportunity-based understanding is closely tied to welfare activation logics. A Jobcenter representative described AGH measures as ideally enabling people to live "a self-determined life without transfer payments" (I23). Justice is thus linked to empowerment through work: providing structure, meaningful activity, and a

pathway toward independence from welfare support. Within this framing, the project is valued as contributing to justice insofar as it offers participants a chance to contribute, (re)gain self-worth, and autonomy.

While governance actors articulated understandings of social justice in response to explicit questions, participants' perspectives on justice emerged more implicitly, through everyday interactions and practical negotiations of fairness within the garden. Initially, fairness was conceived as equality, expressed in participants' expectations of equal tasks and break times on site, grounded in their own understandings of work. In daily activities, this understanding resulted in conflicts due to perceived inequality, when individual capacities, health conditions, or personal circumstances differed. Moreover, these perspectives surfaced in moral evaluations of others as "good" participants.

In contrast, instructors emphasized fairness as situational and relational, adapting tasks to individual needs while explaining their decisions transparently. Over time, fairness came to be understood less as equal treatment than as individual recognition and inclusion among the participants. As one woman put it, it meant ensuring that "no one is left out" (I14). Alongside these positive experiences, tensions between empowerment and precariousness, and between social value and material reward, became visible. These are elaborated in the following sections.

5.2. Labor: Work, Structure, and Meaning

As a women-only AGH measure, Urban Harvest targets participants facing multiple barriers to labor-market participation, including long-term unemployment, care responsibilities, and health constraints (I8, I21). The project offers flexible working hours and physically adapted tasks, conditions particularly important given its peripheral outdoor location requiring bodily presence and seasonal engagement. Figure 1 shows the main functional elements of the garden—container facilities (including an office, storage, sanitary facilities, and a kitchen), a greenhouse, and raised beds—while paths and open green space indicate the general spatial organization of the site.

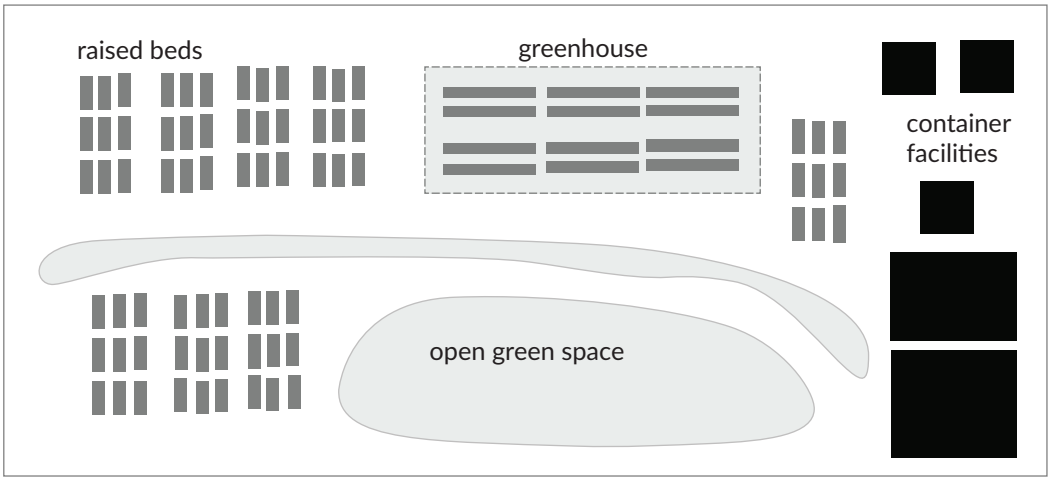

Figure 1. Schematic layout of the case study site.

While some participants hope the gardening experience may support future employment (I15), institutional actors emphasize that transitions into regular or subsidized work are rare and frame the measure primarily as providing structure and stabilization rather than labor-market integration (I8, I21, I23). Success is often assessed individually through attendance and continuity rather than formal employability outcomes. As the municipal representative notes approvingly, the project "seems to be succeeding" (I16), citing the low dropout rate as an indicator of participant engagement. These criteria foreground social stability and ongoing temporary participation within the framework of welfare activation.

Across all actor groups, this AGH is generally valued for providing daily structure for participants. Mornings in the garden are organized around shared coordination routines with the instructors, during which participants allocate tasks and begin activities such as watering, planting, or harvesting across different areas of the site (see Figure 1). This shared routine creates rhythm and orientation, replacing potential isolation with coordinated co-presence.

Beyond this structuring function, participants and instructors attach moral and emotional value to work. Labor is valued for producing visible, tangible, and useful outcomes (I14, I15). Participants and instructors repeatedly contrast the work with "pointless" AGH measures, emphasizing that "something real has to be done here" (I8). Meaning emerges through doing: building raised beds, tending plants, and harvesting self-grown vegetables. One participant summarized this succinctly: "Well, you do something, and then you end up with something in your hands that you can also eat, and it's delicious too" (I15). This meaning extends beyond the individual, as participants connect their work to others' well-being through donations of fresh, organic produce to the local food bank (I14). AGH-work gains legitimacy through tangible outputs and sensory experience rather than through productivity metrics.

Labor is also shaped by spatial negotiation. Tasks are distributed across the site according to physical capacity, weather conditions, and individual preferences, with instructors fostering participatory spaces through open discussions and shared decision-making. Participants may switch activities, slow down, or choose less strenuous work, practices that instructors actively accommodate. Fairness is enacted through these adjustments instead of uniform task allocation. As one participant explained, this flexibility contributes to the desire to "go to work," because it is "not just like that: You do this, that, and the other, like assembly line work" (I13). Working without pressure within one's abilities is explicitly valued, and contrasted with formal employment conditions (I13, I14, I21).

Over time, obligatory participation tends to turn into self-directed engagement. Participants refer to "our garden" or "our tomatoes," signaling identification with the site (I21, I23). Expressing her attachment, one participant explains: "When you have something to do and see that what you're doing contributes to success…you feel proud and go home with pride" (I15). Gardening habits—such as automatically reaching for a watering can when soil appears dry (I13)—illustrate how responsibility becomes internalized through repeated bodily interaction with the space. Here, labor-related valuations are based on social acknowledgement, trust, and the ability to act competently within a shared workspace.

The gardening competence is enabled by the instructors. Most participants enter Urban Harvest without prior gardening experience but acquire practical knowledge through learning-by-doing (I4, I9). Working outdoors is appreciated for its health implications, while gardening with seasonal rhythms fosters ecological

awareness (I13, I14, I15). Participants value this learning primarily through embodied competence and visible contribution, while instructors, project management, and public institutions understand it as a process of (re)building capability and responsibility through practice.

Labor valuations extend into food-centered activities, where moral expectations and everyday norms are negotiated. Shared meals, for example, become sites of moral nudging within everyday work (I9, I13). Instructors address plant-based nutrition as part of broader sustainability concerns. Framing this issue between moral agency and global responsibility, participants respond unevenly, sometimes resisting, appreciating, or pragmatically adapting (I8, I14).

Instances of food waste further expose contrasting moral rationalities. Instructors interpret discarded leftovers as a lack of appreciation for food (I9), while participants' practices also reflect everyday constraints such as time scarcity and care responsibilities. Instructors situate this tension within a broader critique of the food system, framing the garden as a place of counter-practice that revalues food and food labor through care and seasonality, in contrast to what is described as "supermarket socialization" (I9).

5.3. Land: Temporary Security on Marginal Site

The project reflects spatial logics of temporary and peripheral land use negotiated within planning constraints. It occupies a municipally owned plot at the edge of a commercial area, designated as a reserve for a future highway ramp. As construction is unlikely soon, the city granted a 10-year right of use, allowing cultivation within temporal limits. About 1.5 km from the nearest district center, the site is bus-accessible yet remains spatially peripheral. The site is neither central urban nor rural, but a peri-urban fringe space shaped by planning logics of reserve, where social uses become possible under conditions of no immediate economic pressure.

Concerns about vandalism and theft led to the installation of fencing and motion-sensitive lighting (I9). While these measures contribute to a protected and structured workspace appreciated by participants, they also mark the garden as socially bounded, intertwining safety with exclusion and shaping access. Due to the site's peripheral location, public recognition does not arise through everyday urban visibility but depends, for example, on project-level outreach, and municipal communication.

Securing the site required time and coordination across several municipal departments, revealing both institutional commitment and administrative fragmentation (I16, I21). The plot was selected primarily for its availability rather than suitability and remained subject to environmental regulations that added procedural constraints. Municipal actors frame support for urban gardening as contributing to public services (*Daseinsvorsorge*), a core mandate of local government, linking it to social cohesion and community life. They emphasize urban gardening's value by saying "We have learned from experience that it makes such a positive contribution to life in the city and to social cohesion" (I16), but stress that effects are hard to measure. According to the municipal representative, land scarcity and competing economic priorities are key structural obstacles to urban gardening in more urban areas (I16).

At the same time, the municipal representative frames such initiatives as inherently temporary—interim uses of "leftover" land awaiting redevelopment or transitional civic activities until participants secure private gardens (I16). Where central land is scarce and contested, urban gardening is considered appropriate only when it

does not impede economic priorities, legitimizing peripheral siting. This reflects hierarchies of urban land value: Gardening becomes possible precisely because the site currently holds low immediate exchange value. Justice claims are thus conditioned by spatial marginality. The garden's location mirrors participants' social marginalization, with justice enacted through the collective revaluation of "leftover" land.

Nevertheless, the 10-year lease with renewal option is considered favorable (I21), offering a degree of stability while keeping the land available for future development. Project managers appreciate this (limited) security but acknowledge its fragility: Long-term land access depends on political tolerance and municipal priorities (I21). The garden thus operates within an ambivalence of temporary certainty—institutionally stable enough to sustain several gardening seasons and cycles of activity, yet lacking long-term security beyond the project's administrative framework.

The garden's material design combines provisional structures, e.g., portable containers and raised beds, with lasting elements signaling permanence, e.g., paved paths and fruit trees, reflecting its institutionally supported yet spatially temporary status. Marginal land is thus rendered meaningful through collective care and everyday practice, even as long-term security remains uncertain.

Materially, the site reflects its post-industrial legacy. Ground cultivation was impossible due to compacted and contaminated soil, requiring vegetables to be grown in raised beds constructed on site (see Figure 2). Participants built these structures themselves, taking on much of the work in close cooperation with instructors—gradually transforming an initially unsuitable plot into a productive garden. However, early on, skepticism was widespread, as the management elaborates: Colleagues had ridiculed the project, and other professionals had called the location "terrible" or even "nonsense" (I21).

Figure 2. Raised beds used for vegetable cultivation at the project site due to unsuitable ground soil.

However, these constraints became central to the project's identity. What began as pragmatic adaptation was reframed as an experiment in alternative urban land use, reclaiming marginal land for social and ecological purposes (I8, I16). Over time, the initially "wrong" place was recast as proof that urban food production can succeed under difficult conditions. Project managers and municipal actors adopted this narrative, presenting the project as evidence that "it can work anywhere" (I21).

5.4. Exchange: Between Empowerment and Dependency

In its initial phase, exchange at Urban Harvest was shaped by the statutory AGH framework, which permitted production but prohibited sale. During this period, this exclusion from the market not only regulated exchange but redefined how produce is valued. Food was detached from price and productivity metrics and instead evaluated through non-market registers that emphasized who contributes, how effort was judged as fair, and whether the work was socially meaningful. In this way, the framework enabled the garden as a welfare measure while constraining economic valuation.

As part of the publicly funded build-up phase, produce had to be officially donated to the local food bank. In practice, however, informal sharing—such as participants taking vegetables home—introduces alternative valuations of fairness and deservingness (I8, I9, I14). These practices blur the distinction between giving and receiving: Although participants are themselves eligible for food aid, their labor repositions them as contributors. Value is thus attached not only to the produce itself but to the act of working and giving.

The harvest is further qualified through attributes such as freshness and organic quality, which support its valuation as both modest material relief and symbolic recognition (see Figure 3). Several participants explicitly noted that they could not afford organic produce otherwise, describing it as too expensive (I14). Taking vegetables home thus connects recognition of effort with access to food that would otherwise remain economically out of reach. Participants experience this practice as acknowledgment of effort and competence, not as entitlement (I13, I15). Fairness thus emerges situationally, produced through shared judgments of contribution and care instead of predefined rules.

The hourly additional expense allowance further exposes the moral dimension of exchange. For institutions, the ca. €2 hourly allowance is a compensation for additional expenses next to welfare, not a payment (I9, I21, I23); for participants, however, it often feels like partial remuneration for real work. One woman expressed: "We do the same work as the employed staff, but we get €2; they go home with a paycheck" (I15). Her comparison captures a felt sense of unfairness rather than a literal equivalence of tasks,

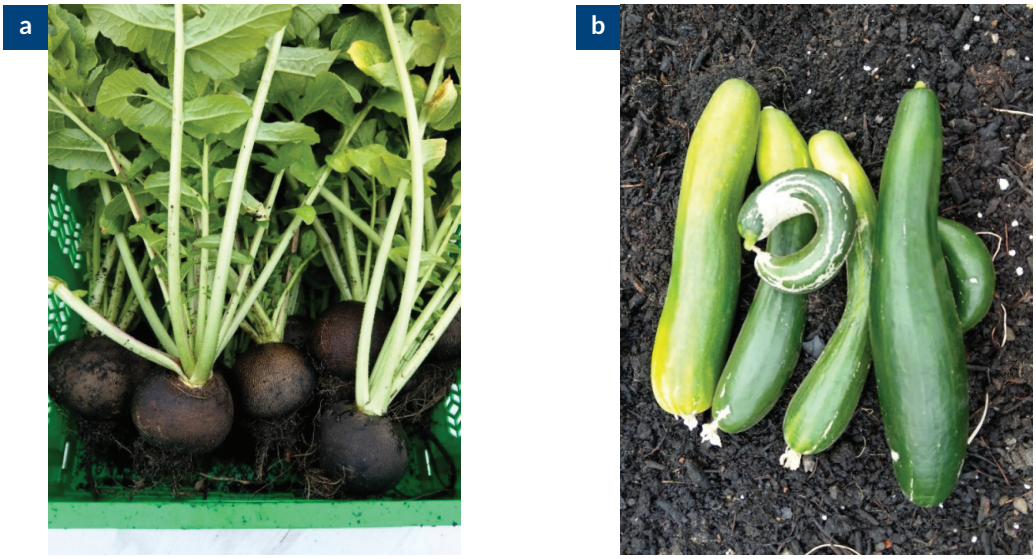

Figure 3. Example of freshly harvested produce: (a) black radish; (b) zucchini.

revealing how participants evaluate fairness through their own experience of effort and recognition, and less through institutional definitions. This discrepancy reveals conflicting valuations: one moral-bureaucratic, legitimizing minimal compensation through welfare logic; the other experiential, linking fairness to effort, dignity, and equivalence. Despite its modest amount, the allowance provides participants with partial recognition and a small degree of financial autonomy.

However, the project's capacity to address poverty remains limited. The allowance and access to vegetables cannot offset chronic income insecurity (I8, I9, I23). Interestingly, not all actors acknowledged the women's precarious situation: One instructor questioned whether participants could be considered as poor, distinguishing between statistical and "real" poverty, suggesting participants are disadvantaged but not destitute (I9). This selective awareness illustrates how, within the welfare framework, poverty is rendered part of the normalized status quo. Alongside this implicit acceptance, a quiet critique emerges of a system that recognizes social contribution while confining it to temporary, welfare-based arrangements rather than stable, fairly paid employment. As one instructor reflected: "The framework conditions here set clear limits…it would be nice if the women were in a different kind of employment than just this measure" (I8).

6. Discussion

Using valuation as a theoretical approach highlights how meaning is produced in practice, treating values as situational, negotiated, and contested, across intersecting project goals, actors, and expectations. Instead of assessing justice against fixed benchmarks, this discussion examines how the three food-justice dimensions—labor, land, and exchange—are shaped and limited through everyday valuation practices.

In the domain of labor, valuation emerges through shared effort and visible production. Once infrastructure and horticultural knowledge were in place, tangible outcomes—raised beds, harvests, and maintained plots—became key sources of recognition. Institutional metrics such as efficiency or employability offer only a partial framing of worth; instead, work is valued for its practical usefulness, shared purpose, and moral significance. Fairness is enacted relationally, negotiated between equal treatment and attention to individual capacities. Participants' attachment to the garden, expressed as pride and identification, reinforces ongoing engagement.

Land valuation follows distinct spatial and planning logics. The garden's worth lies in its ability to activate marginal, peri-urban land for temporary social and ecological benefit. This framing legitimizes the project as a form of public service while simultaneously reproducing precarity by confining urban gardening to peripheral sites with limited temporal security. Spatial conditions are thus not merely contextual but constitutive: Justice is conditioned by the garden's location on land with deferred exchange value, shaped by planning logics of future infrastructure and development priorities. The site's marginality mirrors participants' social positioning, as collective cultivation revalues "leftover" space through practices of care beyond its deferred exchange value. In this sense, the site can be understood as emblematic of the Ruhr region's landscape, where post-industrial land is mobilized for socio-ecological uses while urban food cultivation remains peripheral.

Exchange reveals explicit moral tensions. Situated on peripheral land and insulated from market exchange, the project's spatial and institutional configuration enables a temporary de-commodification of food: Rather than functioning as a commodity, food circulates primarily through charity-based giving and informal sharing. This allows food and labor to be valued through care, contribution, and recognition rather than price, yet

it simultaneously limits redistribution and economic autonomy by confining exchange to welfare-regulated channels. Donations to the local food bank anchor the project in a charitable economy, while informal sharing blurs the distinction between receiving and contributing.

Taking produce home is experienced by many participants as both modest material relief and symbolic recognition, affirming self-efficacy. In this way, participants move between positions of potential recipients of food assistance and contributors to the food provision of others within a welfare setting that enables socially valued contribution while reproducing dependency. The hourly allowance further illustrates this tension: Institutions define it as compensation for expenses, whereas participants experience it as partial remuneration for what is experienced as real work. Although symbolically meaningful, this recognition has limited impact on material security, reflecting the broader constraints of welfare-based arrangements.

Valuation thus unfolds between institutional activation logics and lived practices of inclusion and care. Instructors play a key mediating role. They translate bureaucratic requirements into supportive practice and balance a care ethos with the Jobcenter's logic of efficiency and control. At the institutional scale, the case study's configuration links food to welfare activation, assigning value to participation and care while leaving structural inequalities largely untouched.

In line with feminist scholarship on urban gardening, the case highlights how care-oriented, socially reproductive labor is valued for its relational contributions while remaining institutionally and materially undervalued; the project's design as a women-only AGH intersects with these dynamics, though this aspect is not examined in detail here. Participants' work gains moral recognition and social meaning, yet remains structurally marginal within welfare-based activation frameworks. Temporality further defines these dynamics. The time-limited right of use granted by the municipality allows the garden to operate and develop over multiple seasons, while fixed-term AGH contracts impose much shorter time horizons on participants, producing a structural mismatch between project continuity and individual precarity. Such interim uses constrain long-term planning, yet their adaptability and mobile infrastructure also enable experimentation and replication across sites, echoing McCann et al.'s (2023) notion of impermaculture and highlighting the fragility of interim governance arrangements.

Seen through recognitional, procedural, and distributive dimensions of justice (de Bruin et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2023), the project advances justice mainly through inclusive participation, with little emphasis on redistribution; only in rare cases does participation translate into regular employment. Recognition and procedural justice are present, but rather in partial and situational forms. Recognition emerges through respectful everyday interactions on site, where participants' work is treated with dignity and their contribution is valued; however, this recognition remains project-bound and does not extend to challenging broader stigmas.

Procedural justice unfolds mainly in daily work routines, where decisions about gardening tasks are explained transparently, while participants remain predominantly excluded from shaping the project's institutional framing and temporal conditions. Participation is assigned, not voluntary. Distributive justice remains minimal, as produce and allowances function as symbolic recognition without materially altering economic insecurity. Empowerment thus operates within, not beyond, structural constraints.

Looking at the results from a broader food politics perspective, urban gardening functions mainly as a labor-market activation instrument for welfare recipients rather than a (food) justice concern. As this article has shown, this framing produces incremental, food-related benefits for the participants, yet leaves redistributive transformation seemingly beyond reach. The project therefore sits between mitigation and reproduction of inequality, exemplifying how welfare-based urban gardening both opens and limits pathways toward food justice. As the city of Dortmund integrates food into sustainability agendas as a pragmatic tool of social policy, it signals cautious institutional engagement, currently achieved through goodwill and pilot initiatives rather than structural commitment.

7. Conclusion

This article examined how justice is enacted, negotiated, and constrained in a temporary urban gardening project embedded in labor-market activation policy. Across land, labor, and exchange, valuation practices function as a central mechanism through which justice is made, showing how food justice is configured within a welfare initiative not explicitly aimed at systemic change.

Institutional metrics rooted in welfare activation, such as employability and attendance, provide a partial foundation for valuation. Alongside these, moral-relational valuations grounded in effort, contribution, and care shape how participants and instructors assess fairness in everyday work. Expressions of attachment, such as pride and a sense of belonging, further stabilize these judgments, allowing the AGH to be assessed as meaningful. Together, these practices make justice tangible, albeit provisionally, within the boundaries of welfare regulation and urban development.

Temporary urban gardening thus emerges as a space where institutional, moral, and economic logics intersect, and where inclusion and precarity coexist within participation-oriented structures. Justice here is performed and sustained through everyday acts of valuation that redefine what counts as useful, fair, or worthy. This in-betweenness renders such projects analytically and politically significant, revealing how empowerment and dependency coexist within these arrangements.

As argued here, AGH measures such as Urban Harvest function less as pathways into employment and more as places of temporary stability and belonging within welfare activation regimes. Future research should examine post-urban-gardening-AGH trajectories, including long-term employment and social outcomes beyond the measure itself, which lie outside the scope of this study. Longitudinal research could further trace how valuation processes evolve as projects stabilize, institutionalize, or open to market logics. In the case examined here, the formal (subsidized) employment of former participants made produce sales legally feasible, marking a shift in the project's exchange possibilities and valuation regime. Comparative perspectives could illuminate how differently temporary gardens navigate the intersections of welfare activation, social innovation, and urban policy. Building on this, future work could draw on value pluralism to explore classifications of coexisting value orders, and how they compete, or stabilize, within such initiatives.

For scholars, this study underscores the importance of valuation as a lens for analyzing how justice is made in practice, complementing food-justice research that often assumes fixed ideals. For policymakers and planners, it highlights both the potential and the limits of temporary projects as laboratories of learning: spaces that reveal plural patterns of valuation and values, yet remain constrained in the absence of structural

transformation. Moving beyond temporary activation requires rethinking urban gardening as part of a broader urban food landscape—where labor-market policy, planning, and social policy converge to secure lasting and equitable access to food production and land.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

In the interest of transparency and responsible use of LLMs, the author discloses that ChatGPT (OpenAI's GPT-5) was used as a tool for language editing during the writing process. Its role was limited to improving grammar, clarity, and the structure of arguments. All text was carefully reviewed, verified, and revised by the author, who retains full authorship.

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