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An Analysis of Decolonization Efforts in Urban Agriculture: A Pathway to Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Cultural Revitalization
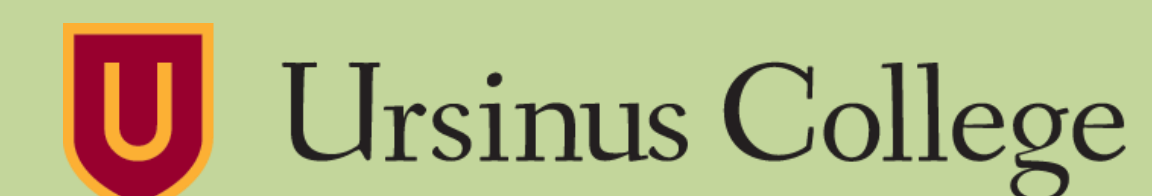
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An Analysis of Decolonization Efforts in Urban Agriculture: a Pathway to Food Sovereignty and Cultural Revitalization

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Introduction

My research addresses the capacity of urban agriculture (UA) to better serve, represent, and heal Indigenous communities through an analysis of the relationships and interactions between Indigenous communities (IC) and urban agriculture projects (UAPs). While there are many known benefits of UAPs, including their capacity for food production, the relationship between these projects and Indigenous groups is less widely studied. It is critical that UAP leaders have cultural awareness and are trained to interact with marginalized communities to avoid unknowingly perpetuating dominant white, middle/upper class ideologies of success. Actors involved in urban agriculture (UA) can shape its goals and outcomes (*Figure 1*), meaning it is critical to understand how their roles and actions impact Indigenous people's access to and participation in these projects.
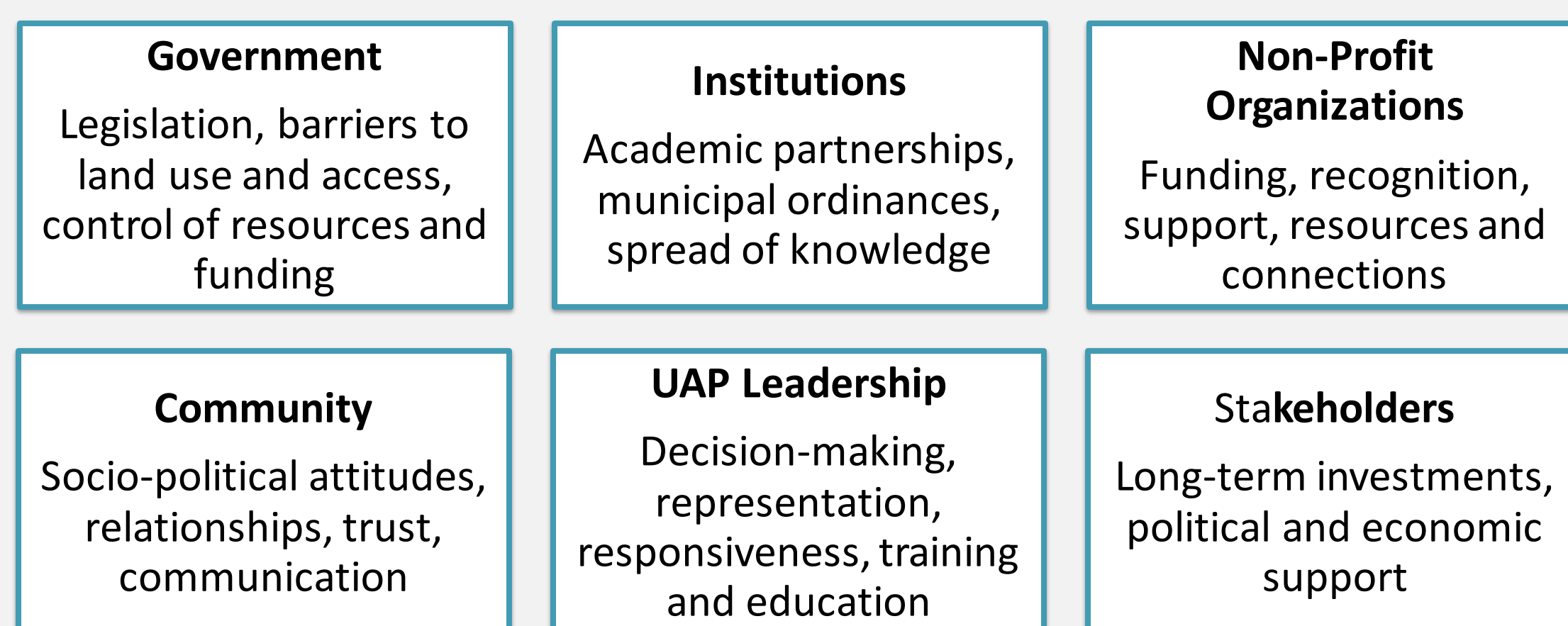
Government
Legislation, barriers to land use and access, control of resources and funding

Institutions
Academic partnerships, municipal ordinances, spread of knowledge

Non-Profit Organizations
Funding, recognition, support, resources and connections

Community
Socio-political attitudes, relationships, trust, communication

UAP Leadership
Decision-making, representation, responsiveness, training and education

Stakeholders
Long-term investments, political and economic support

Figure 1: Actors and their influences in the UA process. Data collected from (Carlisle et al., 2019), ("Dream of Wild Health," n.d.), (Mailer et al., 2018), (Wang, 2015)

In order to understand how these UA actors interact and shape goals and outcomes in ways that may be colonialist in their dynamics, I conceptualize urban agriculture as a 7-step process (*Table 1*). Using Indigenous-led systems as a model, I analyzed the steps of the conventional agriculture process to determine when and how colonial methodologies exclude or do not represent IC, and where decolonization efforts should be focused.

Table 1: Conceptualizing Urban Agriculture as a 7-Step Process. Data collected from (Bradley & Herrera, 2015), (Carlisle et al., 2019), ("The Cultural Conservancy," n.d.), (Wang, 2015)

7 Steps of Urban Agriculture	Conventional UA (CUA)	Indigenous-led UA (IUA)	Focus of Decolonizing Efforts
Land Tenure	Private ownership of land and permissions to make changes to site	Return of Native lands Creating access to land and control of resources	Remove barriers to land use and access, and ensure long-term control of site
Species Selection	High-yield, marketable produce (Fruits, Vegetables, herbs)	Importance of including native and culturally significant species	Select Indigenous foods Include both edible and non-edible species Listen to community needs
Site Preparation	Altering land with inputs to achieve ideal growing conditions (use of technology)	Land use practices and species ecosystem services specific to culture/region	Explore existing community land use methods, choose species with mutually beneficial relationships
Site Maintenance and Stewardship	Maintaining plant health, tracking and adding inputs when necessary (use of technology)	Land is stewarded and cared for in a kinship sense, rather than managed and adapted	Build community knowledge of stewardship, teach through interactive and experiential programs
Harvest	Harvest all marketable produce when ripe	Honorable Harvest Take only what is needed, practice reciprocity	Integrate reciprocity into the harvesting process, use every part of the plant
Distribution	Sell to distributors, prices often marked up for profit	Harvested items are shared among the community or sold directly to consumers	Increase access to and affordability of produce
End of season/repeat of cycle	Indoor systems continue producing, outdoor UA systems begin planning for next season	Adapting programs to better represent and provide for the community	Survey community opinions on UA project, make appropriate changes to better serve community

Methods

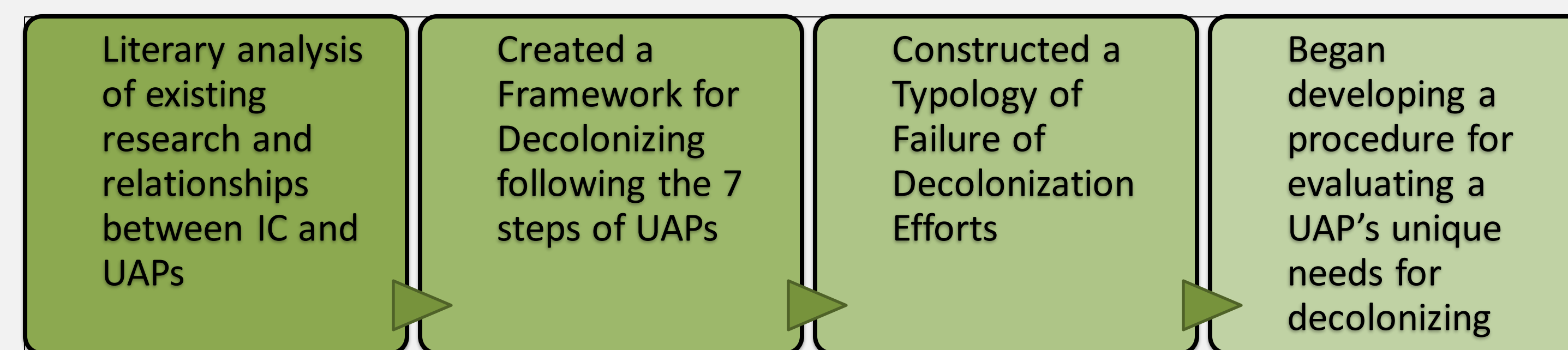| Literary analysis of existing research and relationships between IC and UAPs	Created a Framework for Decolonizing following the 7 steps of UAPs	Constructed a Typology of Failure of Decolonization Efforts	Began developing a procedure for evaluating a UAP's unique needs for decolonizing

Figure 2: Conceptual model of the analytical approach to this decolonizing research

Results

My findings indicate that the process of urban agriculture is inherently founded on colonialist methodologies and ideas of success but has the capacity to better serve, represent, and heal IC through a process of decolonizing. Several UAPs have begun this process; however, there are common points of failure that must be addressed and rectified *(Figure 3),* which I have conceptualized in a typology. The typology is constructed to highlight the scales at which these failures occur among UA actors, and how they impact the ability of UA to support IC.
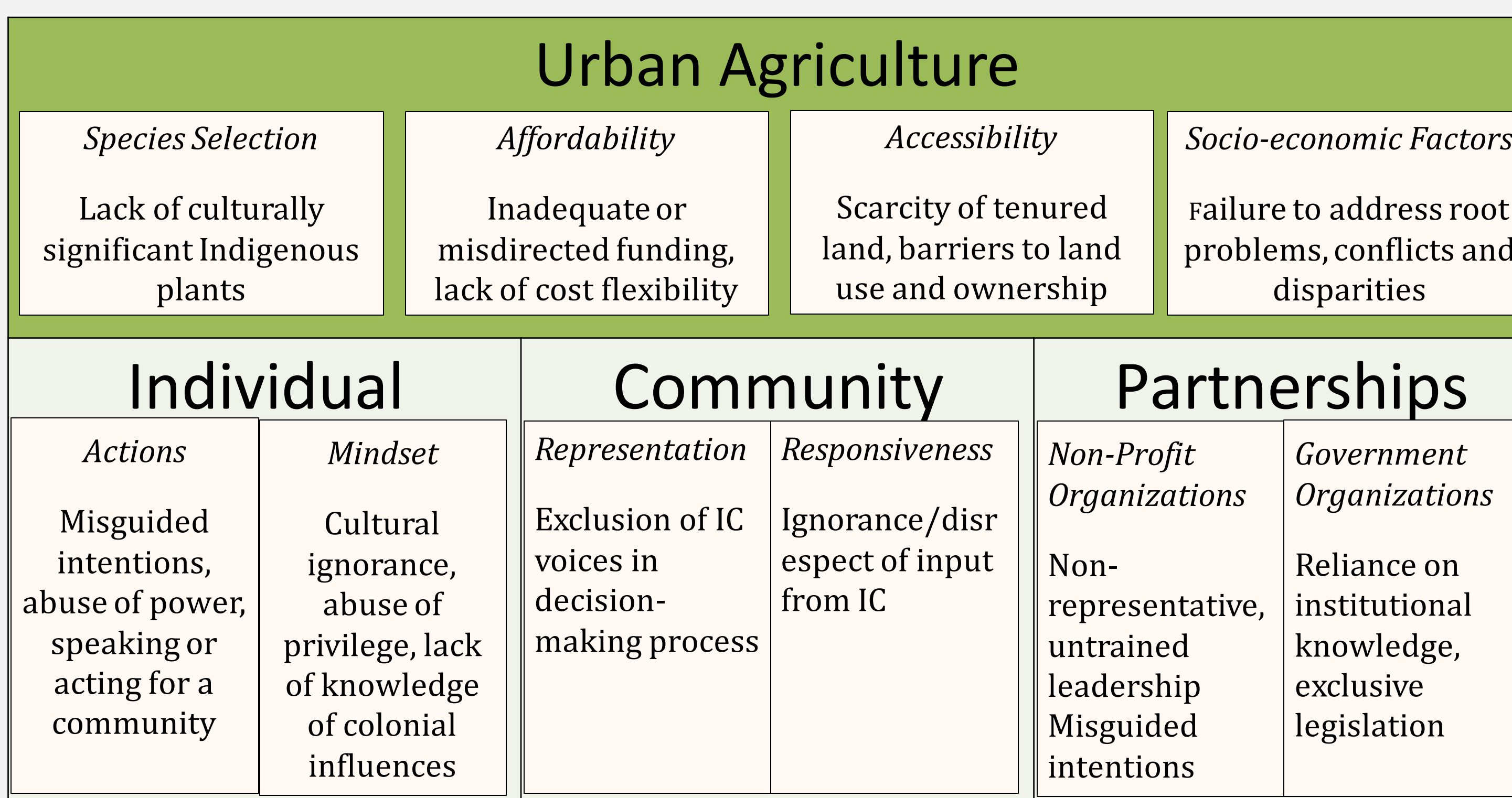
Urban Agriculture

Species Selection	*Affordability*	*Accessibility*	*Socio-economic Factors*
Lack of culturally significant Indigenous plants	Inadequate or misdirected funding, lack of cost flexibility	Scarcity of tenured land, barriers to land use and ownership	Failure to address root problems, conflicts and disparities

Individual

Actions	*Mindset*
Misguided intentions, abuse of power, speaking or acting for a community	Cultural ignorance, abuse of privilege, lack of knowledge of colonial influences

Community

Representation	*Responsiveness*
Exclusion of IC voices in decision-making process	Ignorance/disrespect of input from IC

Partnerships

Non-Profit Organizations	*Government Organizations*
Non-representative, untrained leadership Misguided intentions	Reliance on institutional knowledge, exclusive legislation

Figure 3: A typology of Failures in Decolonizing Agriculture. Data gathered from (Bradley & Herrera, 2015), (Carlisle et al., 2019), ("First Nations Development Institute," n.d.), ("Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative," n.d.), (Livstrom et al., 2022), (Mailer et al., 2018)

Towards Decolonizing UA

Decolonization is an ongoing process that must accurately and respectfully represent the wants and needs of each unique Native community. To better achieve this outcome, I have begun developing a set of questions to assess the steps where decolonizing efforts should be focused and evaluate community participation and interest in the project *(Figure 4)*.

Successful Examples

Several UA projects are in the process of decolonizing, providing case studies to determine the success and efficacy of their efforts. The most successful UAPs often have Indigenous leaders or representatives involved in the decolonizing and decision-making processes and respond well to input or concerns from Indigenous communities.

Sample Questions

Step 2: Species Selection
- Who is involved in species selection?
  - *In what ways are Indigenous communities involved in choosing species?*
  - *To what extent are IC encouraged to participate in species selection*
  - *Who has access to information and resources for species selection?*
- What Species are Selected?
  - *What species hold cultural significance to local Indigenous communities?*
  - *Are Indigenous plant species accessible? What sources are they coming from?*
  - *What non-edible components are included?*

Figure 4: Sample questions from Decolonizing Procedure

Figure 5: Photos taken from https://instagram.com/ursinusfoodforest, featuring Assistant Chief Jeremy Johnson of the Delaware Tribe of Indians sharing mountain mint with students (left)

Conclusions

The findings highlight the importance of decolonizing each of the seven steps of the UA process, with respect to the unique needs of the community the project aims to serve. Representing and encouraging Indigenous voices throughout the decision-making process allows the community to shape the project to better serve their needs, while dismantling the historically white dominance of education and service-based leadership.

In the context of Ursinus College's recent collaborative Welcome Home Project with the Delaware Tribe of Indians, I hope to model my findings at the College's Food Forest *(Figure 5)* and Campus Farm sites in partnership with the Tribe. We have proposed this project in conversations between Ursinus College and representatives from the Delaware Tribe of Indians, and the responses have been encouraging. Guided by my findings, I have identified a few areas unique to the College and the partnering community where decolonizing efforts will be focused, and I am awaiting input from the Tribe before proceeding further.

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