

# **Developing the Links: An Assessment of the Potential for Community Food Initiatives to Contribute to the Development of Sustainable Food Systems in South East Wales**

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## **Introduction**

This document presents a summary of key findings from a research project which examined the actual and potential contribution of community food initiatives to the development of sustainable local food systems in South East Wales. **A more detailed discussion of the research findings can be downloaded free of charge from [here](#).** The term community food initiatives (CFI's) is used to describe diverse projects which span a spectrum of community level activities which include Urban Agriculture, Community Supported Agriculture, food co-operatives and community run farmers markets or box schemes. In addition to being defined by their activities the initiatives explored are also defined by their location within the third sector and their concern to work at a community level. Many of the initiatives are located within wider Community Development organisations and all of the initiatives included within the research are concerned, in their own way, with building community.

## **Research Methodology**

The methodology was comprised of a combination of site visits, interviews with project staff and participants, and a review of a rapidly expanding body of literature relating to community food initiatives and issues of sustainable food more generally. Throughout its duration, the study sought to adopt an action based and participatory model of research. In practice this involved informal post interview dialogue with participants, a half day feedback seminar in which initial findings and their implications for practice were discussed with participants, and study visits to exemplar projects in other parts of the UK. The intention of these visits was to enable research participants to learn from the experiences of established projects elsewhere in the UK and to create opportunities for them to network with one another.

## **Background: Sustainable Food and Community Food Initiatives**

At the beginning of the Twenty First Century there is growing evidence that the industrial food system which emerged during the Twentieth Century is becoming increasingly unsustainable. In 2009 Chatham House published a report on food security which drew together the opinions of eight leading analysts and subjected them to peer review by other recognised experts in this field. The report identified a series of fundamental social, economic and environmental pressures (the “new fundamentals”) affecting the food systems

ability to ensure global food security. These are the combined impacts of: Rising Population; Nutrition Transition; Pressure on Energy; Pressure on Land; Pressure on Water; Climate Change and Labour.

Alongside recognition of the pressures facing the food system and the need for change, there is increasing awareness of the nature of the changes which are needed and of the key characteristics required of a sustainable food system. These involve major changes in production and distribution methods, so as to both reduce and make more efficient use of finite and increasingly scarce resources. At the same time there is a need to reduce negative environmental impacts, particularly, although by no means exclusively, the impacts upon climate change. Critically, the development of a sustainable food system will also require a transformation of westernised patterns and cultures of consumption through reductions in overall consumption, reductions in food waste, reduced consumption of resource intensive foodstuffs and resource intensive modes of consumption (e.g. highly packaged ready meals or eating out at restaurants).

Whilst there is increasing recognition of the shortcomings of the industrial food system and of the requirements of a sustainable food system, there is far less understanding about how to make the transition from one system to another. In the face of tentative and largely ineffective statutory action, some commentators claim to have detected the spontaneous emergence of a sustainable food movement at the grassroots level. Here, it is possible to identify groups of consumers who are making conscious pro-environmental choices about the products that they are purchasing and the outlets they are purchasing them from. This is clearly evidenced in consumption trends such as the popularity of local, seasonal and organic products and the parallel increase in alternative distribution methods such as farmers markets and box schemes.

However, these changes are restricted to the extreme margins of consumption and to particular social strata, distinguished in part by their relative affluence. To this extent the trends towards sustainable food can be seen as an exclusive club which is largely inaccessible to those on low or breadline incomes. Furthermore within the plurality of ideas and viewpoints embodied within the sustainable food movement, it is possible to identify a set of ideas which serve to perpetuate misleading and stigmatising myths about poverty. In the specific context of sustainable food, these discourses tend to link assumptions about poor diets, diet related ill-health, with highly processed, resource intensive foodstuffs and bad choices made at the household level. As one individual involved in this research claimed, sustainable food is not inaccessible to those on low incomes, it's just that they choose "to eat biscuits" instead. Statements such as this are misleading about the structural nature and causes of poverty. They also deflect attention away from the fundamental fact that the lifestyles of poorer populations tend to have significantly lower ecological impacts than those of more affluent populations.

National ecological footprint analyses conducted for the Welsh Assembly Government have consistently shown that the poorest local authorities in

Wales have the lowest per capita ecological footprints, a relationship which is equally as strong when the food footprint is examined in isolation. Indeed, hypothecated consumption patterns generated by the Stockholm Environmental Institute calculated that the ecological impact of an “efficiency focused” individual on a low income was precisely half that of a more affluent “consumer with a conscience”.

### **The Promise of Community Food Initiatives**

Against the background described above the promise of CFIs is essentially twofold. First, that in both theory and practise they can provide holistic models of sustainable food systems which seek to simultaneously address the social, economic and environmental dimensions of Sustainable Development. Whilst, this quality can also be identified within the wider sustainable food movement, CFI's are frequently distinguished by the centrality of social justice and inclusion in their concerns and activities. As such there are numerous examples of initiatives seeking to address food access/poverty issues, working with ethnic minority populations, disengaged young people, with people recovering from mental illness or substance misuse problems. The second key area of potential in lies in the apparent capacity of CFIs to act as agents of transition. The particular significance of this is that whilst there is an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the lack of sustainability in the current system and of the key requirements of a sustainable food system, there is remarkably little understanding about how to make the transition from one system to another. In this context of uncertainty many analysts regard community based initiatives as a key setting for the types of innovation, experimentation and adaptation which will provide the necessary learning for this journey. At the same time their pragmatic, community based and participatory approach, manages to combine many of the key factors which analysts of behaviour and culture change regard as fundamental success factors in promoting lasting changes in consciousness.

### **Community Food Initiatives in South East Wales**

There are no definitive figures for the numbers of CFI's in South East Wales, but evidence from a number of sources suggests considerable increase in initiatives in recent years. A distinctive feature of this growth is that it is frequently occurring in areas experiencing high levels of deprivation and by community based organisations tasked with the regeneration of these communities. This engagement with sustainable food can be seen as emerging out of a growing pattern of community organisations engaging with Sustainable Development more generally.

Although it is still too early to ascertain longer term impacts the early evidence is encouraging. There are clear examples of initiatives which are making significant contributions to the development of more sustainable local food systems and which are simultaneously seeking to address local food poverty and access issues. Moreover, as has occurred elsewhere in the UK, CFIs in Wales have demonstrated a capacity to build mutually beneficial linkages with key areas of community regeneration activity, social inclusion activities and

existing community infrastructure. Perhaps most significantly in this respect, there is evidence to suggest that CFIs are having an impact upon those areas where regeneration programmes have often struggled to make a significant impact (e.g. in creating sustainable jobs, local economic development and 'programme bending'). In the longer term and into the future, their activities could well be of critical importance in empowering communities to develop a greater sense of local 'food sovereignty'.

### **Key Factors Affecting the Development of Community Food Initiatives in South East Wales**

It is clear that CFI's potentially have a considerable role to play in the development of more sustainable and localised food systems. Initial evidence from initiatives operating in South East Wales and elsewhere in the UK suggests that in certain key respects this potential is already being actualised. However, the research also identified eight key factors which are currently inhibiting the extent to which CFIs are able to fulfil their potential.

These factors are:

- Economics
- Policy
- Funding and Support
- The Knowledge Deficit
- Land
- Labour
- Consumer Resistance
- Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

Out of these eight factors, five appear most critical to the development of CFIs. These are discussed below. Whilst the remaining factors (labour, consumer resistance, crime and anti-social behaviour) all have significant impacts on the operation of CFIs, they do not appear likely to have a fundamental effect in shaping their future development. For reasons of space they are not considered further in this research summary, but are discussed in the full report.

#### **Economics**

CFIs typically face an economic conundrum generated by their need to maintain economic viability in conditions where there is a lack of stable long term funding and their concern to make sustainably produced food accessible to low income populations who cannot afford to pay market prices. Arguably the one model which comes closest to squaring this circle is the traditional allotments system. However, its ability to contribute to a wider food system is limited by the availability of allotments and individuals with the time, physical capability, knowledge and inclination to produce their own food (It's also notable that this ability is underpinned by the modicum of stable funding which results from local authorities statutory obligations towards allotments provision).

A key problem facing CFIs looking to ensure continuity through generating their own income streams is that the obvious route of food production is relatively unprofitable. None of the initiatives encountered in this research (either directly or in the literature) were able to sustain themselves through food production alone and where this did form a component of revenue raising activities, it was often a relatively minor and loss making component. Instead, the major entrepreneurial income streams tended to be derived from the provision of education, training and therapeutic services and/or acting as intermediaries for other local producers. One exception to this was Stroud Community Supported Agriculture which is able to fund itself through food production alone. The key factors involved in this appear to be its scale of production, a (small) degree of mechanisation, a strong volunteer base and, critically, a committed membership with the financial capacity to afford market prices.

Judged against the narrow yardstick of neo-liberal economics CFIs could therefore be dismissed as uneconomic. However, such an analysis fails to take into account the external impacts of CFIs in arenas as diverse as local economic development, health and social care, and reductions in GhG emissions. All of these impacts have potential, but difficult to quantify, cost savings associated within them, and as such need to be factored into any economic analysis.

## **Policy**

Despite the ostensibly favourable conditions created by the Welsh Assembly Government's statutory commitment to Sustainable Development, Welsh CFIs currently receive little policy support or recognition. Certain key policy documents have overlooked the issue of sustainable food entirely, let alone considered the role which CFIs might play. Where policy has been developed it has typically been permissive (enabling agencies to act rather than placing a requirement on them to do so) and come without the funding required to incentivise action. Even where statutory obligations already exist, as is the case with allotment provision, the extent to which they are actually fulfilled varies considerably across different local authorities.

That said it is possible to identify examples of an emerging policy framework capable of supporting CFIs in the 2007-2013 Rural Development Plan (RDP) and in recent developments within public procurement policy. The RDP identifies a number of objectives which are of relevance to CFIs, is relatively well funded and has been used to support the development of some CFIs in South East Wales. Using the public sector procurement budget as a means of achieving sustainability objectives has been a long term goal of successive Sustainable Development strategies in Wales and a Local Sourcing Action Plan published in 2009 identified a series of roles for community based initiatives. However, the urban character of South East Wales means that most areas are not eligible for support from the RDP, whilst the developments in procurement policy have to date envisioned only a minor and marginal role for CFIs.

## **Funding and Support**

Although several projects had been successful in accessing significant pots of funding from sources such as the Rural Development Plan and the Big Lottery Fund, other projects reported that an inability to secure basic start up funding was a major inhibitor to their activities. Significantly there is no Welsh equivalent of the Big Lottery Fund's £50 million Local Food programme which has been a major catalyst to the development of new projects in England. The funding problem goes beyond the scarcity of start up funding. A long standing and well documented weakness of funding regimes in the community sector is the lack of long term sustained funding. The implications of this are that once the initial start up period has ended projects are often faced with the prospect of either reinventing themselves for the next round of funding or closing their doors. This threatens the continuity of successful initiatives and also means that significant amounts of staff time and energy are devoted to securing continuity funding rather than fulfilling the projects' aims. Whilst in many instances CFIs will be able to develop significant income streams from social enterprise activities, it is unlikely that they will be able to be entirely self funding whilst maintaining their breadth of activities. Their ability to resolve the economic conundrum described above would therefore seem to rely in part upon the existence of stable income streams that are not derived solely from entrepreneurial activities.

## **Knowledge Deficit**

There is currently a profound lack of even the most basic information about the scale, extent and dimensions of CFIs in Wales, a situation which makes it impossible to quantify trends or needs occurring within this sector. It is indicative of the extent of this problem that, despite their long standing presence in Welsh life, accurate statistics do not even exist for the number of allotment sites in Wales. The evidence deficit is equally if not more apparent when it comes to assessing CFI's impact upon the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Whilst it is possible to identify individual examples of projects and point to their likely effects, there is currently no systematic analysis of the nature, extent or significance of impact. This is important not only for developing greater understanding of CFIs for its own sake but also for their future development. In the context of the economic, policy and funding issues described above, it will be increasingly important for CFIs to be able to comprehensively demonstrate their impacts across the various dimensions of sustainability. The complexity and scale of this task would appear to be beyond the scope of any single piece of research. Instead it is likely to require a programme of multi-disciplinary and cross sectoral research which is geared towards building a robust evidence base, and developing the methodological tools to enable initiatives to monitor and evaluate their activities for themselves. It is important that such a programme does not seek to reinvent the wheel but instead draws upon the international experiences and the emerging knowledge base in other parts of the UK.

## **Land**

Contrary to the reported experience from other locations in the UK, none of the participants in this project reported significant problems accessing land and most were able to access plots of several acres with relative ease. However, for those initiatives which are unable to purchase their plots, the conditions of access mean that many face potential problems with security of tenure once initial leasehold agreements expire. The recent loss of well used and long standing allotment sites in the area suggests that this is more than a potential problem. Security of tenure is important not only for the long term continuity of CFIs or for the implications it has for the level of community time and resources which are put into a site. At a more fundamental level it is important in determining a community's ability to develop a relationship with the land where they are able to feel a sense of responsibility towards that land. This ability is frequently regarded as a critical factor in the development of a sustainable culture.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The overall conclusions of this research is that CFIs can potentially play a significant role in responding to the changes needed within the food system, through developing their own models of sustainable food systems and in helping facilitate the transition from one system to another. A particularly significant feature in the development of CFIs in South East Wales is that it appears to be occurring within some of the most deprived communities in Wales. This is likely to be a reflection of a combination of factors which include the generally lower than average incomes in South Wales, the focus of key funding regimes on social and regeneration goals, and the existence of an extensive infrastructure of community regeneration organisations operating in deprived communities. Whatever the cause, a key outcome is that they are operating at the sharp end of attempts to reconcile the most difficult aspects of the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable food. Their early experiences of grappling with this dilemma points to some significant successes and to the possibility of exciting longer term opportunities.

However, for all their initial promise many CFIs face a precarious and uncertain future arising from the interplay of the economic circumstances which they operate in, and the lack of policy frameworks and funding structures to support their long term development. Clearly then, the extent to which CFIs are able to realise their potential in contributing to the development of a more sustainable food system will be profoundly influenced by the extent to which policy makers address these structural issues.

However, the likelihood of radical change in the near future appears remote and as such the short to medium term development of CFIs in South Wales is likely to occur without major sources of dedicated funding and without substantial policy support. As such the following recommendations are not focussed on identifying a list of incremental technical fixes or policy adjustments. Instead, they are intended as a series of inter-linked suggestions as to the ways in which CFIs might develop within this context of structural

constraints, but also as a suggestion for further actions through which they can develop their ability to change the context itself. Whilst many would require some degree of funding and statutory support this is likely to be modest. More critical local success factors are likely to be levels of local support and the extent to which it is possible to develop meaningful collaborations across different sectors and disciplines.

### **Recommendation 1**

The establishment of a broad based network of individuals, groups and other stakeholders engaged with CFIs, which provide a means for sharing knowledge and experience between members, providing mutual support and developing a coherent and robust lobbying voice. There are a number of existing networks in South East Wales area but these are currently quite disparate and focussed on particular spheres of activity such as allotments, community gardens, nutrition or food access. What appears to be needed is a broader coalition which seeks to bring these disparate strands of activity together and which draws in other in other parties interested in the development of sustainable food systems.

### **Recommendation 2**

The establishment of a programme of inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral research which develops the empirical knowledge base about the environmental, social and economic impacts of CFIs. As an outcome of this process it would also seek to develop research instruments and key indicators which initiatives would be able to use in their own monitoring and evaluation, thereby enabling them to develop robust data about the impacts of their activities. The international experience of urban agriculture has shown that such research programmes can be a critical driver to the development and mainstream recognition of this type of activity. Whilst there are transferable lessons to be gleaned from this international experience, there is also a fundamental need for information which is specific to the UK context at this moment in time.

### **Recommendation 3**

Development of the existing allotments infrastructure. The allotments model is currently the only model in Wales which is economically self financing and produces significant quantities of sustainable food which is accessible to low income populations. This model also has the advantages of having an extensive existing infrastructure, a long standing presence in community life, and a degree of statutory protection and associated core funding. For these reasons the allotments movement is a key source of strength in the development of CFIs. In recent years allotments have also been a key site of innovation with the development of community gardens within allotment sites and/or the use of allotment plots to deliver therapeutic, social inclusion or educational activities. Potentially, this is a trend which could make a major contribution to the long term future development of the allotments movement by creating mutually beneficial relationships between allotment sites and key local institutions such as community organisations and schools. Whilst there are numerous examples of such linkages throughout South East Wales, their development also appears to have been relatively ad hoc, dependent on the

presence of key individuals and on the capacity of individual allotment society committees. One suggestion for building on this trend might therefore be the establishment of regional development workers tasked with facilitating links between allotment sites and local institutions such as schools and community organisations.

However, an apparent lack of importance attached to allotments within many local authorities, diverse and often obscure tenure patterns and limitations within the allotments legislation itself mean that the long term future of many sites is insecure. A core aspect of developing the allotments infrastructure must therefore be efforts to ensure greater statutory protection of sites: strengthening the rights to allotments; greater enforcement of existing legislation at the local authority level; clarification of local authority responsibilities in terms of the provision of sites; and ensuring that all local authorities sign up to an agreed code of good practise in relation to the management of sites.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The development of strategic pilot initiatives in which different models of CFI are tried, tested and developed in the specific socio-economic conditions which exist within South East Wales. It is neither possible nor appropriate to present a prescriptive list of what these projects should be here, as this should be a dynamic process occurring through dialogue at community level and within the type of network described above. However, obvious areas of interest might be exploring the scope for community based organisations to become involved in the supply side of public sector procurement or the piloting of Community Supported Agriculture initiatives similar to the Stroud model. There are already existing community sector organisations ideally placed to develop such models in terms of their access to land, relationships with local farmers, established viable customer base and the existence of a core group of committed volunteers. Equally, there is a relatively strong base of environmentally conscious individuals evident in the local emergence of such things as local transition town groups and local branches of national organisations such as Friends of The Earth. Such pilot initiatives could not only demonstrate the worth of particular models but could also be a catalyst to the development of the sorts of inter project linkages which have yet to emerge. Experience from elsewhere suggests that whilst these initiatives are likely to require some degree of start up funding, this is likely to be relatively modest and that a more critical success factor is likely to be levels of local support.