

Building a local community food system

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The globalised food chain is moving food production further away from the communities it serves, at the same time creating widespread health problems and contributing to ruination of the natural environment through soil degradation, change of land use and loss of habitat. It's becoming clear that food production will demand innovation if we are to stem what appears to be an unstoppable and increasingly detrimental decline in the quality of what we grow and eat. A Somerset-based social enterprise project is showing the value of bringing together community engagement, with sustainable growing, and access to good food.

With 30 years' experience of working as a business and management consultant, I arrived in Somerset in 2005 to deliver a project that supported small businesses to become more successful. Since then I have delivered numerous economic and community development projects with a strong social purpose, including tackling poverty by helping people to set up their own business, working with construction businesses across the south west to adopt environmental technologies, and introducing computer coding into primary schools to help give children new skills and possibly support them to achieve their future potential. I joined Somerset Local Food two years ago and have led the transition of the business from a commercial model to a community-owned not-for profit Community Benefit Society.

The big challenge

The global food sector accounts for between 14% and 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Vermeulen *et al*, 2012) with around 50% of those emissions attributable to transportation, refrigeration, packaging and waste on a scale not previously experienced. Over-production and commoditisation of an abundance of processed food is making food a less valued, cheap and disposable commodity. And the well documented visual quality requirements for fresh produce is forcing farmers to dispose of unattractive yet perfectly edible food. These requirements have reduced consumer choice to an homogenised range of fresh produce grown for appearance and yield, and caused a loss of ancient heritage varieties whose unexplored genetic properties may well prove crucial to withstanding the impact of climate change.

'Food is the most important thing to our health and to our life, yet we degrade it and don't value it properly. At the end of

the day, farmers will only produce to what the consumer wants. It's about everybody taking responsibility, taking more interest in their food and where it's produced.'

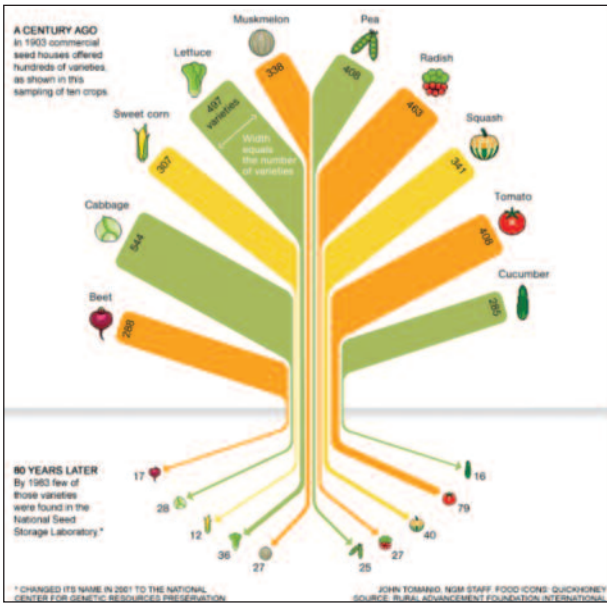
(Walrond, 2019)

'Good food' is a term coined by the Bristol Food Policy Council to describe the broader value of real food. 'As well as being tasty, safe, healthy and affordable, the food we eat should be good for nature, good for workers, good for local businesses and good for animal welfare.' And yet even this definition misses the true power of good food to bring people together, to build community, and reconnect people with nature and each other, and thereby mitigate the health and wellbeing challenges we all face in an increasingly fast, disjointed and isolating society.

Somerset Local Food

We launched as an online food retailer in 2002 in the early days of slow dial-up internet. An existing network of farmers markets in Somerset brought

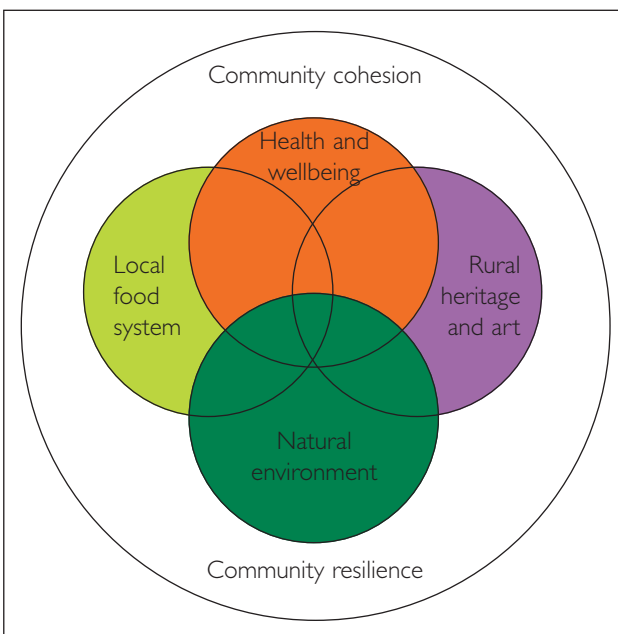
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Food variety tree

together the market gardeners, family-owned farms and small-scale food producers which didn't have outlets through supermarkets or large retail chains. By broadening their consumer base – selling produce online and delivering orders across a much larger area that included the cities of Bristol and Bath – small local growers stood a better chance of achieving traditional business development targets of increased turnover and job creation.

Initially Somerset Local Food was a roaring success, and achieved its purpose of 'supporting small-scale food producers'. Then, as supermarkets started retailing online, sales volumes went into a decline, and growers tried to compete on price by reducing their own margins. Inevitably the next 10 years saw waning numbers of



Somerset Local Food social impact model

market gardeners and small-scale family-owned farms, and a large turnover of local micro-food producers.

The initial organisation had failed because it treated food as a commodity: a tool for creating financial wealth and jobs. So another approach was needed, one that recognised the broader social impact for 'good food' to boost community engagement and increase social capital. An understanding of these vital added values would remind potential consumers that in reality there can only be one price for food, a price that reflects the true cost to society and the environment. Buying 'cheap food' in fact creates a debt that our children and grandchildren will have to pay for an overburdened health system, soil degradation, declining biodiversity, continued destruction of natural habitat, and our inability to curb the impacts of climate change on food systems. In addition, all these factors will have an enormous impact on rural communities.

Two years ago Somerset Local Food received significant social investment to transform into a not-for-profit social enterprise. With new branding and website and a committed purpose it is now thriving and once again growing communities through food, and supporting local small-scale, community food growers, farmers and producers who are passionate about healthy food, and about protecting and enhancing the natural environment. We are helping build networks among those food producers to share knowledge and experiences, and encourage them to collaborate to develop plans for extending access to good food for local communities using limited growing space.

The Community Farm at Chew Valley in Somerset is an example of an engaged community grower. It was started by a group of volunteers in April 2011. Initial start-up funds came from 419 people investing in a community share offer, creating a group of consumers with shared values for good food, for the environment, and to belong to a community of like-minded people. Today, the farm grows market garden-scale organic vegetables and fruit on a 14-acre rented site that supplies an organic veg box service and wholesale delivery hub supplying Somerset Local Food and other wholesale customers.

Expanding to be more inclusive of the local community the farm now welcomes people to 'get on our land' for learning, work, recreation and wellbeing. The staff team has grown to around 15 full-time equivalent people with an annual turnover approaching £1 million. The site, which at the start had nothing but one cold water tap, now has four polytunnels, a warehouse and cold store for the packing operation, a yurt and roundhouse for classrooms, and a learning area where children and wellbeing groups turn their hand to growing. There are accessible composting toilets, mature apple trees, owl boxes, and a pond.

The operation delivers around 500 veg boxes each week in Bristol, Bath and the Chew Valley. A small farm shop runs in Bath, and a weekly fresh produce stall at Southmead Hospital in Bristol serves NHS staff and visitors. The farm also supplies some wholesale



Volunteers at the community farm

consumers. By working directly with other producers, both at home and abroad, the farm pays a fair price for produce that goes directly to the grower. The Get on Our Land programme welcomes weekday volunteers all year round and on 15 community farmer Saturdays each year. In growing season, schools bring 60 children each week for a learning day run by partner organisation Earthwise. Diverse groups come for learning, team days and wildlife activities. Partnerships with Bristol Drugs Project, Bath Wellbeing College, and Ecowild enable well-being courses, and therapeutic and rehabilitation activities. More than 1,200 people spend at least a day on the farm each year and numbers are continuing to grow.

In addition to the impact of a 14-acre site converted to organic farming, and routes to market for many more organic acres, the major impact is on people; box consumers say they love the produce, eat far more fruit and veg because it is always there, and are healthier as a result. Volunteers and visitors say that for them the farm is a lifeline, a meaningful project that they love being part of. It gives them outdoor activity, friendship, purpose, joy, structure, new skills, confidence, routes to employment, connections in the local community, learning about farming and wildlife, and leads to lasting change in healthy eating. In short they describe it as 'rehab in a mad world'.

Somerset Local Food Limited also supports therapeutic and social growing projects through the sale of its surplus produce.



Root Connections collect a polytunnel from Charles Dowding, the Somerset-based leading authority on no-dig gardening

Seed of Hope CIC (SoH) was started in 2014 over a pint of cider in the local pub. Jayne Alcock, the grounds and gardens supervisor of the Walled Gardens of Cannington, and Kris Scotting realised they both had interest and experience of using horticulture as a tool to bring people together in a therapeutic environment. Jayne had previously worked as a mental health social worker before moving into horticulture, and Kris had trained as a mental health nurse, and worked in health and social care for over 30 years, several of these years in therapeutic horticulture projects. They approached Bridgewater and Taunton College for permission to start a weekly group at the Walled Gardens of Cannington for people with mental health issues, and the initial SoH project was born. Subsequently groups in Watchet and Glastonbury have started and a pilot gardening project launched with a local housing association to help tenants who can't cope with their gardens. The vision of Seed of Hope CIC is to grow mental health recovery throughout the south west of England using therapeutic horticulture. Like the Big Issue, they believe that people with mental health needs need a hand up rather than a handout, and are challenging society's assumptions about the abilities of people with mental health problems.

SoH has supplied fresh herbs and wild flower seeds and we are looking forward to a regular supply of mushrooms grown at their Glastonbury site.

Root Connections CIC links homelessness and community through inter-agency involvement. It operates a successful outreach service for rough sleepers, offering a safe place where people can seek help and advice, and assistance to start their journey of recovery. The ethos is one of hope, finding meaning and strength together, giving support and by showing ways towards a more sustainable future.

The Root Connections plot is based on a beautiful Duchy farm in Somerset, occupied by farmer Rob Addicott and wife Suzanne, who both have a heart for community and people on the fringes of society. The garden sits alongside the Dairy House, a six-bed hostel offering residential accommodation to the homeless, rough sleepers and isolated individuals with (sometimes complex) mental health issues and needs. Initially the garden was a patch of land Rob offered to the residents but a volunteer quickly saw the benefits of residents working together outdoors, with the local community getting involved as well, which resulted in improved health, sleep and general wellbeing. The Dairy House residents are encouraged to volunteer in the garden as often as they feel they're able to, where we offer structured activities, encourage soft horticultural learning and support with social re-integration by working alongside our team of volunteers. We also have volunteer land days two mornings each week, where people from the local community join us and work alongside the Dairy House residents and volunteers, and each Friday we come together for a shared lunch of fresh, local produce. The garden is now sufficiently productive that the produce can be sold through a network of local churches, farmers markets, other community events and online through Somerset Local Food.



Seeds of Hope erecting a garden shed at their Watchet site

“ We are now eagerly anticipating the roll-out of social prescribing so we can engage with GPs and primary care agencies ”

Our community of consumers identify and recommend new suppliers and suggest which growers and producers they would like to meet through visits to farms. These gatherings for enjoying local produce always generate conversation and new friendships. There is also a growing recognition among community food producers that they are not competing with each other; that through collaboration we can grow the market for good food and improve its nutritional value, while building stronger, more resilient and coherent communities passionate about good food and their natural environment. Together we can offer a broader choice including heritage varieties of fresh produce, more traditional cuts of meat no longer offered by supermarkets, and we are seeing a growing appreciation of local foods, such as the amazing choice of cheeses and dairy produce.

The Good Food Network

Through the Good Food Network – lately established with the support of Resonance, a social impact investment company – we are already beginning to deliver

projects. A pilot distribution network will be aiming to move seasonal produce gluts between local distribution hubs, and enable improved crop planning across the entire sub-region, with Bristol to the north and all of Devon to the south.

Bristol is a former Green Capital and currently a Sustainable Food City. Its well-established and productive community food system, led by Feed Bristol, incorporates not only a network of community farms and small-scale producers, but also independent food retailers, catering and hospitality businesses. To the south in Devon there are many established community farms, producers and retailers, so it makes sense to link all these local food systems and so increase efficiencies through collaboration and create a

bigger social impact through knowledge-transfer and by sharing assets and produce.

We are now eagerly anticipating the roll-out of social prescribing so we can engage with GPs and primary care agencies for mutual benefit. By bringing good food to many more people we can improve local health and well-being, while building social capital and at the same time protecting and enhancing our local natural environment. By working together like this to join up the dots, the Good Food Network’s impacts could be felt far beyond the south west of England.

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Somerset Local Food team