CoP Compact – Session Summary 30.10.24
The OxFarmtoFork Initiative
Exploring Financial Tools for Food System Innovators
Fiona Steel , Good Food Oxfordshire

Case description

Introduction to three concepts of knowledge transfer:

- **Network** – Good Food Oxfordshire is is a network of over 200 local organisations committed to a fairer, healthier and more sustainable food system for Oxfordshire.

- **Vision and values** – (1) transparent and sustainable local food supply chain; (2) agroecological growers and responsible producers; (3) fair livelihoods and respectful relationships; (4) reach colleges, schools, hospitals.

- **Achievements (Phase 1)** – £67,578 worth of local produce sold in pilot year; £32,000 Invested in farm infrastructure; 78% of produce sold was veg; >2m food miles saved; 18 Oxford colleges; 9.6k students reached.

- **Ambitions: 2025-28** – stablise and reach turnover of £300,000 and investment of £150,000; loan repayment at 7% over 6-7 y; 2026: 30 colleges and 10 schools, turnover £650,000, production increase via field-scale and market gardening; 2028: turnover of £1,4m

- **Funding routes** – (1) Grant Funding – moderate in the beginning; (2) partner investment - £2,000/college – but difficult for schools, (3) Loans – farmer are risk-averse, infrastructure needs funds, no legal entity yet, (4) Social investment funds – no assets to secure loans – challenge to organise the collective to underwrite loan risk.

Take-home lessons

- In order to get an ahead start into phase 1, GoodFood Oxfordshire (GFO) **building trust between different actors** has been a priority. GFO organised several **campaigns with colleges** in order to promote the concept. Key to this phase has been been to join some of the college **bourses with the finance-operational staff** – which turned out as rather labour-intensive. Another important step has been to 'bring people together' – e.g. GFO invited **chefs to visit farms** and they literally got first-hand impressions of the freshness of the products, but also how it is produced and delivered. Meanwhile we developed **shared crop planning** with the producers.

- The (relatively moderate) yearly contribution of **£2,000 per college**, as been chosen to **avoid formal approval of financial control** as tactical step to secure initial funding and commitment. Even though colleges recognize the benefits of the procurement they are not ready to pay more money,. Observation*: *staying under the radar of the financial control has a short-term advantage also means that the commitment by colleges is partial with* **significant decision-makers not being involved**. *The latter would almost require a second campaigning effort of a different kind. GFO strives to thrives diversify customers by expanding to hospitals and social care organisations and others – but this turned out to be more challenging because of administrative hurdles.*

- Another important step is to turn the OxFarmToForm initiative into a cooperation with a legal status – this is what lawyers are currently working on. The Midcounties Co-operative – an umbrella organization with more than 6.500 staff colleagues, around 450 sites and almost 700,000 member appears to be really interested in this. However, the first step of becoming a legal entity is to establish a partnership - so it is a common decision.

- Regarding barriers to the transition, a recent **World Economic Forum's report** states that while food-agri has high impact on health and environment., this not reflected in the funding. **Three barriers stand out**: (1) the **absence of sector-specific expertise** on the side of the founders; (2) the **incapacity to carry out data-driven decisions** (see volunteer approach on IT) and (3) the **difficulty of coordinating** throughout the food value chain.

- To **support an evidence base** for the social and health benefits of their approach of combatting food insecurity in vulnerable communities through local food, OxFarmToFork has started working with a school located in one of the highest areas of food insecurity in Oxfordshire. They launched a **crowdfunding to fund** the difference between the school budget and the cost of the food from the farmers, which is another example of an alternative route for funding.

*observations are post-meetings viewpoints, which have not been shared during the session

- There is also a need to explore if and how to scale - namely, to scale horizontally (i.e. getting more farmers and colleges on board) or vertically (i.e. working with the same farmers but trying to help them get more revenue and sell a greater proportion of their products via OxFarmtoFork as well as the colleges/purchasers to get a greater proportion of their food budget being spent via OxFarmtoFork)

Discussion

- Anant: what is actually the **source of mistrust** on the side of the farmers? Fiona: from previous experiences with colleges, where **chefs just cancelled orders on short notice, farmers got burned..** here our communication and trust-based model helps to avoid such situations.
- Reiner reports about a farmer, who changed his business model towards procurement and was subsequently kicked out by the big distributors! Reiner therefore wonders whether OxFarmtoFork has a strategy.
- Fiona: there is not scientific formula behind it, lots of trial and error… but we do annual crop planning as a key reference. In order to build trust and confidence in the market we engage in common crop planning with farmers. To balance seasonal aspects, we brought bread, eggs, mushrooms and microgreens in, though vegetables is our main priority.
- Livia, referring to examples for Barcelona, but also to mobility and energy cooperatives (e.g. Coop57) wonders if OxFarmToFork is embedded in an ecosystem of cooperations. Fiona: not sure – banks are quite hesitant because of lack of assets.
- Andreas: many started as cooperative for farmers, COOP as well, I think, is the second largest bank in Europe started as a cooperative and is now based in France. It actually mutated to a kind of neoliberal bank – so I think we do need to look at the macro level.
- Fiona: we have recently engaged with a Coop who might be able to provide us with some more financial support. We have funding to set up lawyer to set up our own Coop.
- Rosario: how is OxFarmToFork actually paid? Fiona: we initial for 1 person 2 days/week; now GFO we are putting in four days/week of paid staff time which is partly funded by service fees on revenue sales, but where we are subsidising that middle part of customer relationship & supplier management administration, payments, logistics...
- Rosina: we are also thinking about creating a cooperative but not for public procurement but for transforming food environments – e.g. by creating solidarity restaurants in public spaces, which work with social inclusion and cover the costs of community connectors;

Attendees

Anant Jani, Heidelberg University
Nadia Tonoli, Commune of Bergamo
Maria do Rosário Oliveir, University of Lissabon
Rosina Malagrida, IrsiCaixa
Reiner Braun, Brigitte Braun & Sanghmitra

Banerjee, os4os
Thibault Lejeune, Brugs Food Lab
Aleksandra Jovanovic & Dirk Wascher, SusMetro

Further reading/Annex

- Hansalim Organic Cooperative
- Elinor Ostrom - 8 Steps for Managing the Commons
- Banks: https://www.gls.de/privatkunden/, https://www.vermoegenspool.at/eng/, https://www.lotzapp.at/
- Food Coop: https://tagwerkcenter.net/ueber-uns/unsere-geschichte
- World Economic Forum's report –
- Financing Model: Wealth Pool | Home
- Morgenrot cooperation: https://morgenrot.wien/
- Impact Investment in Urban Food Systems – WUR - Link

Next CoP events

Please see upcoming announcements!

Send your case to copfeast@gmail.com!

Community of Practice Food & Health

Part of: **www.food2030.eu**

FOOD 2030 ONLINE PLATFORM

Coordinated by SusMetro
www.feast2030.eu

FEAST

Contact: SUSMETRO,
copfeast@gmail.com
Fiona Steel, Good Food Oxforshire
fiona@gfo.org.uk

Co-funded by the European Union