

Food issues census 2017 Report Launch

6th March, Kings Place, London

The Census

Food and farming affect many issues of political and public concern, ranging from climate change to animal welfare to human health. Civil society organisations play a vital role in addressing these, through a wide range of activities including high-profile national campaigns, setting nutritional standards and growing local food. In 2011, the first food issues census was conducted to measure the extent of civil society's work, the breadth of issues, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of the sector as a whole.

Five years on, the **Food issues census 2017** provides a new overview of the work of civil society groups in the UK, based on a survey in 2016 of around 140 organisations. It provides updated insights on the size, shape and strategies of the sector.

The launch

On 6th March 2017, 50 delegates representing funders and civil society organisations working in the food and farming sector gathered to discuss the findings of the latest Food issues census 2017.

At the launch event, as well as presenting key findings from the work, participants were given opportunity to split into four groups for discussions (held under the Chatham House rule)

This is a report of those discussions, reflecting the issues, constraints and solutions that CSOs have found in their work on food and farming.

1. COLLABORATION

How can funders encourage more collaboration? How can CSOs make the case to funders for collaborative work? How can CSOs, with limited resources, collaborate better?

- *Networking catalyses collaboration*

Collaboration simply can't happen if people don't have the opportunity to meet and share ideas in the first place. Networking not only allows for sharing knowledge with like-minded organisations, but it can also bring unlikely partners around the same table.

However, it was reported that funding for networking is hard to come by, possibly because it is undervalued both by funders and CSOs, who struggle to find the time or capacity to participate in meetings or networking events.

It was felt that the chief executives of organisations should lead on networking, but they either tend to relegate it to second fiddle to project delivery, or they develop 'networking fatigue'.

Small local organisations were also flagged as too often losing out when it comes to having opportunities to seek potential collaborations and to participate in them. With their limited resources, they are even more prone to being detached from local organisations in other parts of the country, which whom they could share so much knowledge.

- *Funders as networking hubs*

Funders have a unique opportunity to act as a collaboration hub, with their overview of projects and organisations within the sector. In fact, all discussions groups highlighted the untapped power of funders to act as a CSO 'dating site'. It was felt that individual funders could look at their grantees and identify crossovers between similar organisations.

However, convening networking events to foster collaborations is very time consuming and most funders do not dedicate resources for this. That said, both funders and CSOs suggested that being clearer in funding proposals about dedicating time for networking and building collaborations would be sensible. In addition, funders could improve communication between their grantees, and between themselves and other funding bodies.

Finally, the sector already has some networking platforms which funders could be invited to (e.g. Sustain's annual meetings).

- *Funders' constraints*

The sector is vibrant and diverse, but this can make it overwhelming for funders. Participants highlighted some projects that created umbrella organisations, which allowed funders to fund more strategically. It also helped groups of small organisations access funding.

Some grant models make it harder for CSOs to re-apply for further funding. It was mentioned that local authority grants sometimes limit the number of grants an organisation can apply for. This means that once their funding has ended, local organisations are limited in their options.

Funders need tangible deliverables from organisations they support, which limits the scope of securing core (or operational) funding, whose tangible benefits are harder to quantify.

- *What successful collaboration looks like*

The most successful collaborations were identified as those with complementary, non-competing organisations with aligned missions, developing a project that goes beyond securing funding. These collaborations can start from the most random meetings between organisations with different focuses. These chance encounters can only happen if resources are allocated to networking events, and are effective in allowing organisations to build on each other's experience.

Another key ingredient for a successful collaboration, in particular where scale or size of organisations are very different, is to be clear about the added value from each organisation. Partnerships between different types and sizes of organisations can be a great opportunity for different disciplines to come together (e.g. food, climate change, urbanisation).

Another key criterion for successful collaboration is dedicated staff time (often through a coordinator role) to drive the collaboration forward. In the case of the new School Food Plan, once the original funding expired, fundraising was difficult for all individual organisations involved, so a volunteer secretariat was set up to manage the collaboration.

- *A broad range of collaborations*

Beyond CSO collaborations, there was a focus on those not present in the room: the business and academic communities. Questions were raised such as: whether CSOs should collaborate with the private sector; and if such opportunities arise, how to best approach them? Views varied, from those who would not collaborate with businesses at all to those who would be open to it. Whether to collaborate would vary case-by-case, and clear tangible benefits from the collaboration should be defined, not least to avoid greenwashing.

Academia was also highlighted as a great opportunity to help CSOs answer research questions, or by connecting students with organisations. Academic funding was viewed as less contentious than corporate, but also more limiting because of its very defined scopes of research.

Finally, collaboration among funders themselves was also raised as an important issue to address. It seems that funders do share informally, but there is scope for them to join forces more formally and be more strategic as a unified cohort.

2. FUNDING

How can we go beyond the traditional funding case? How can we attract new non-food funders? How can we plug the void left by EU funding (probably) being taken away?

- *Consolidating the message*

There is a need for CSOs to get much better at conveying why food work matters; what benefits it can bring; and what the case for investment is to secure more strategic funding. For funded organisations, this might include, for example, more recognition of the functions and strategic focus provided by 'core' and 'policy' work, as well as drawing in specialist expertise. But how do you communicate complexity with a simple message?

There are common messages and impact statistics that all would benefit from, if collated and presented in a more coordinated way. Compelling story-telling is as important as numbers. As one participant said, '*we need to be far more clever about packaging [how we package messages up] and communication*'. Funders sometimes felt overwhelmed by the sector, which seems fragmented in some ways. There was a clear call for sector-wide sharing of successes, insights of what works, common messages, and collaborative approaches to achieving change. This is particularly true in light of the EU referendum.

- *Current funding landscape*

At the moment, many organisations rely on project and grant funding. This is increasingly challenging, with reduced funds available and lots of competition amongst CSOs. Food is recognised by many as an important issue to work on, so it is likely more organisations are seeking support in this way.

Some groups have been exploring whether businesses can provide funding (from a carrier bag levy to formal sponsorship arrangement), which can be just as valuable for expertise and reach as for financial support. For those that this was relevant for, the preference was to work with companies whose brand is 'ethical'. Company funding can be good for delivery work, where photogenic opportunities, corporate branding and numerical results may be needed. But there were strong caveats about working with companies associated with reputation risks, control over outcomes and methods, lack of support for less publicity friendly projects, or mission drift. There was also recognition that corporate funding is not an easy (or desirable) option for policy work, where independence, reputational integrity and campaigning are likely to be critical.

- *Funding challenges*

There was general recognition that the source of funds, the structure of how funding is arranged and the requirement to prove impacts, all have a big effect on the type of organisation that can seek such funds, or can work in a way to deliver on funder expectations. Some funding would demand a more 'business and results focused' approach (e.g. contracts with Clinical Commissioning Groups); others might allow innovation and experiment (e.g. foundations). Repackaging a project, or even organisational restructuring to fit funding requirements is neither easy nor advisable, but some CSOs are finding themselves having to do this to continue to finance their work.

Proof of impact, monitoring, evaluation, 'making the case' and story-telling were all reoccurring themes. What to measure, and how to report this, is a constant source of discussion for CSOs, and depends on different factors, including funder and political priorities, communication and business needs and much more. Having some impact data common to types of project and intervention would be helpful, to avoid replication and 'build the case for similar action'. Examples include the evidence for good food on educational attainment. But there remains the need to stay flexible and creative – there is no 'one size fits all'.

There were different opinions on which is more effective: funding a diverse array of smaller projects, or funding a smaller number of joined-up projects and partnership working.

Impact of Brexit

The UK leaving the EU was identified as a risk by some civil society groups. Most participants had not led on EU funded work, but many had benefited as partners or contributors to EU projects, or from research and activities generated over the years. Some issues are more heavily funded by the EU than others (e.g. fish), so they are likely to struggle more. This source of funding potentially drying up was likely to have a big impact over time, draining useful resources and expertise from the sector. It highlights the importance of organisations working to diversify funding sources.

- *Alternative funding sources*

Some organisations are exploring Social Impact Bonds (payment for services on delivery of certain outcomes), which can then attract external investment. There was interest in this approach, but also concern about the potentially onerous responsibilities and financial risks.

There was also interest in structural funds, e.g. through the Local Enterprise Partnerships (which replaced the Regional Development Agencies that had previously funded or instigated a lot of work on sustainable food and farming in the 2000s) and other new arrangements post- Common Agricultural Policy and post- Rural Development Funding, if framed as ‘public money for public good’. However, there are huge uncertainties about how such funding will be governed or delivered.

Crowd-funding was of increasing interest, particularly for local projects and those with a winning story to tell. Some foundations and other funders have helped with increasing the value of such activity through seed funding, match funding and/or promotion. Some innovative forms of crowd-funding were also emerging such as Soup and Edge, with engaging systems for pitching and funding.

Philanthropic funding was another area that organisations were exploring, with different levels of success. Some organisations and their trustees had useful address books to draw on; others found such connections more challenging. This was likely to contribute to inequalities of opportunity for successful fundraising in this way.

- *Beyond food*

Participating funders encouraged groups to look beyond ‘traditional funders’, and ask which other funders might be able to incorporate a food element into what they do (and some may already be doing so). There was also a strong interest in working with organisations ‘beyond food’, demonstrating ‘what food can do’ to deliver on other objectives around – for example – health, education, community cohesion, crime reduction, greening cities, jobs and skills, entrepreneurial opportunities, farm livelihoods, low-carbon systems, etc.

- *Funders joining forces*

As in other discussion groups, funders were identified as strategic hubs, able to identify overlaps and gaps between their fundees, for the sector to become more coherent and strategic in its approach.

3. INNOVATION

How can the sector attract more funding for ongoing work proven to be effective? How can existing solutions be better shared? How can space for innovation be created?

- *Collaboration as a route to innovation*

Effective collaboration was identified as a key ingredient for innovation, but – as explored in the collaboration discussion group – effective collaboration requires an effective strategy. Innovation should occur as part of a collaboration, not to solely seek funding. It is important to find partners that

share similar mission and values, to alleviate pressures on small organisations of seeking funding, creating partnerships and being innovative all at the same time.

It is often unclear who sets the strategy. For good innovation to occur, organisations need to play to their strengths. Not all partners are created equal, with some (e.g. corporate partners, chefs, etc.) often having a will to collaborate, but not necessarily the skills to innovate. In the end, it was suggested, if good innovation happens, the funding will follow.

- *Challenges to innovation*

Creating a new project can bring much-needed cash into the organisation. However, constantly adding projects to an organisation's portfolio can lead to it overstretching itself, and ultimately becoming unsustainable. If stable core funding were available, there would be more room to innovate.

What happens when an old idea is just as effective as a new one? Or what if an organisation wants to replicate work that is effective elsewhere, and by definition is not 'innovative'?

The food system is constructed in a way that makes change really hard to happen. There are three types of change: more of the same; change within pattern; and change of pattern. One funder mentioned that they were interested in projects that think outside the box and 'disrupt' systems. Some organisations expressed concerns that for such projects, it is harder to provide the evidence that a project can deliver as much as less 'wacky' ideas. This also raised questions around the assessment of innovation.

Finally, if good innovation relies on good collaboration, then all the challenges faced by collaborations will be faced by innovation. Good collaboration needs careful managing: it does not come naturally.

- *Current funding model*

The focus is often on project funding, but some initial core funding is needed for a project to emerge. It was argued that core funding frees up resources and time for CSOs to do what they need to fulfil their goals, while project-based funding can overstretch an organisation, diluting attention and resources.

- *Sharing knowledge*

There was a sense from some that everyone wants to work together, but no one wants to share knowledge (this is particularly true for corporate partners). Even the charity sector can hesitate to drop barriers and be open. However, if the sector is to consolidate its impact, sharing knowledge is a vital part of the collaborative process. Linking organisations with the capacity to do research with those who need research could be a way forward.

It is not enough to share; CSOs have to share *well*. This should happen throughout a project, not just at the end, and could focus on both what worked and what didn't. One funder suggested doing a Failure Festival (sharing lessons learned from 'failing'), which was well received by participants.

Sharing could take many forms. The Food Research Collaboration was mentioned as a really valuable resource for its policy reviews and newsletter. Other ideas included interviews (e.g. Radio 4), podcasts, graphics, cartoons, etc. Peer-reviewed articles were also cited as important but sometimes lacked wider readership, raising questions around the need for a more streamlined publication. However, this could clog the already overly subscribed land of information out there, while individual organisations may start competing to be the go-to organisation on particular issues.

If an organisation is very clear in defining its USP, then it would be easier to defend it and to be more open in collaborations. There is a need to remove the misconception that there is competition which in reality does not often exist.

- *Funders as hubs*

Again, funders were raised as a key player to consolidate the sector and facilitate innovation, brokering partnerships. At the moment, partnered organisations need to create trust and relationships, and then approach a funder. Could this model be reversed, and funders be the trustworthy partner in the project? Funders could also provide a database of 'elevator pitches' from organisations, mapping all the USPs.

There were challenges raised around funders wanting to have their own branding on projects, but this is likely to vary between the different types of funders. Many of those present seemed open to the idea.

The Food Matters Live Innovation Lounge was highlighted as a successful model to create collaborations.

- *Diversity vs complexity*

The current landscape is a broad range of organisations working on a large variety of issues. Questions were raised around the need to remain a diverse sector, with key specialist silos, while core funding is already scarce. With organisations already trying to cover the bare minimum in administrative costs, on top of innovating, should organisations in the sector explore merging more? And if so, how can it do this without losing organisation USPs (to secure funding) or limiting the broad range of issues that need to be addressed in the sector?

4. PROFILE

How can we get sustainable food and farming higher up in the public's consciousness, and on politicians' radar? How can we raise the sector's profile in Brexit debates?

- *One key message*

In concordance with other groups, participants thought that unifying the sector's message was critical to be able to raise its profile. This is every PR/communications charity staff's challenge. There is also a vicious circle where players blame other sectors for the current situation, when energy should be spent working together to find a solution. It was suggested that a key spokesperson was needed to bring the sector up people's agendas. Much as there was until recently, a UK Champion for Global Food Security, should there be an 'official' champion (or champions) for sustainable food?

There is a strong need to 'join the dots' among the diverse and often disparate organisation within the sector, both for our public facing profile and in our business engagement. Broad umbrella organisations, like the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics or a Climate Change coalition for the food system, can bring different stakeholders together. There also needs to be a connection between hunger, food, wildlife and health, so choices, where possible, are informed.

The need for an advocacy strategy for some of these issues, with clear messages and outcomes, was also flagged as a key ingredient. An example of this is the Food Foundation work on advocacy strategy around UK vegetable production and consumption ('Peas Please'). However as mentioned before, who decides and how to convey the complexity of the sector in one simple message is a challenge. Lessons can be learned from the work of the UN and international societies, where the Sustainable Development Goals are the legal framework.

What is it that we want? What might the 'one key message' be? Something around high standards, healthy and good quality food perhaps, but articulated in a more compelling way? There is a political need to have clear goals.

- *Multi-level strategy*

The **media** is a crucial outlet for CSOs to raise the profile of food and farming, but the news cycle is fast moving, and it is difficult to sustain attention over a longer period of time. Having fragmented voices in the sector does not help. A co-ordinated message delivered by a small number of spokespeople would help the sector to harness the power of the media.

Meanwhile, the **government** tends to place the responsibility for choosing sustainable food onto the general public. Participants expressed how hard it is to get policy makers involved, who are often London centric, focusing on one issue, and not necessarily thinking systematically. There needs to be more public engagement. Square Meal was mentioned as a good example of how to involve politicians in developing policy. Working at a local level, targeting politicians in their constituencies could influence policy makers. The Sustainable Food Cities initiative was cited as a great model for this.

There is a need to influence **big lobbyists** (e.g. NFU) who can have a strong hold on the political agenda. It was suggested that the NFU seems to focus its support on dairy, sheep, beef and cereals, rather than horticulture, which needs a UK-wide plan. The sector could galvanise the rural communities' voice and other sectors to put forward voices other than the NFU's, especially post-Brexit.

The media, government, and business need to listen more (and better) to what people think, what they do, and why.

- *Post Brexit?*

There is a risk of a race to the bottom post-Brexit. Perhaps one way to help thinking about Brexit is through the lens of food. What is needed is a civil society group to challenge this. There could be a focus on the policy changes needed to achieve a sustainable food system after Brexit, with who is doing what and how we can work together while delivering our niche. There could also be a public campaign asking politicians whether people want a high food standards UK or a bargain Britain. It was argued that 'Leave' voters did not vote for lower standards and worse food. The next steps in the negotiation need a really strong technical underpinning, with a clear monitoring and evaluation plan. A small working group could coordinate the advocacy strategy and oversee monitoring and evaluation. Useful examples mentioned included the Climate Change coalition, Zero Hunger challenge and Make Poverty History.

- *Funders' role*

Funders were seen again as vital, including for raising the profile of food. There is a need to better fund small organisations, and to provide core funding, which can currently exclude smaller charities. Core funding enables NGOs to collaborate more and better, and have time to really engage with people and business around this agenda.

Summary

What transpired from the various discussions is that **funders can clearly play a more active role** in creating the space for effective collaboration and innovation to happen, as they are uniquely placed to have an overview of the sector – notwithstanding the often competing demands on funders' time. This was mentioned across all discussions groups. Furthermore, the **plea for more core funding** (as opposed to project-specific funding) was clear from those present, also hinting to a push for a new funding models. This led to a strong emphasis on **dedicating resourced to networking**, as effective meetings could lead to successful collaborations, which could in turn lead to innovative ideas, finally leading to more funding and a capacity to raise the profile of the sector overall.

Some of the key ideas that emerged from the discussion included:

- developing a UK Food Funders Network to connect funders and strength funding strategies;
- organising a ‘Failure festival for food’ to allow organisations to share their experiences;
- running an Annual networking and ‘birds eye view’ event for food CSOs and funders;
- building the case for why sustainable food is worth investing in; and
- joining forces to develop ‘Key issue alliances’ and influence policy more efficiently.

Next steps

For CSOs, use the census to showcase the value of core funding and dedicated funds to networking and non-project capacity building.

For funders, remember that you are another voice in this sector and your participation is equally valued. Join CSOs in their networking, and help the sector find its unifying voice and space to push it forward.

For all, remember that not only is this sector incredibly rich and varied, but that there are lots and lots of us here for the same purpose: a food and agriculture sector with high standards, producing healthy and good quality food for all.

If you wish to have hard copies of the food issues census 2017, please email info@foodissuescensus.org. You can download it on www.foodissuescensus.org, while also exploring and downloading the non-attributed data. You will also find the full set of case studies there.

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