

Models for CSAs to address food equality

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Food poverty should not exist and most of the causes are at a policy level which we cannot fix. With public services missing and inequitable economic policy, overstretched farms and community groups are stepping in to attempt to meet needs in their communities. Addressing food equality, at best, encompasses addressing some of the systemic or household causes of poverty and is done with dignity, respect, choice, engagement and sovereignty.

<https://www.nourishscotland.org/projects/dignity>

At the least, it provides free food to people who need it. At this end of the scale, we have food banks issuing bags of prepacked custard creams and crisps. Much of the food used in food poverty projects is surplus food which they do not choose and have no budget to pay for. This is better than people going hungry and not to be knocked, but as a society, we could do better. There are an enormous number of people, especially families with children, who regularly miss meals because of poverty. This is widespread and occurs in all parts of the UK, often unseen. A food bank isn't a perfect solution but it can meet the most pressing need - to eat today.

Addressing food inequality encompasses reaching people who have no food to eat today. It also encompasses the huge number of households who are regularly not accessing a good enough diet, often because of financial poverty, including many working households. Food poverty is currently so prevalent as to be normal, though often invisible. There will probably be people within walking distance of most CSAs who cannot afford to eat properly but are unknown to the CSA. There are other factors involved including lack of kitchen facilities, poor provision of shops and transport, mental health issues, disability, food preferences and food culture. People in food poverty are not just in food poverty – we come with whole lives and often people arrive at a food bank with whole-life situations that are not addressed with a bag of food.

In the UK, there are many fantastic community organisations, often urban, engaging and building community in disadvantaged areas, sharing many activities and providing food 'on the side' or as a vehicle for other benefits eg supportive chat or access to a warm space. Typically, their main focus is not on the provenance, nutrition or sustainability of the food and they rarely meet a farmer. Typically they have almost no food budget. It is hard to come forward and ask for help and these community embedded groups are accessible and welcoming.

Meanwhile, often in rural areas, there are fabulous food and farming projects, talking about equality but providing high quality food to mainly comfortably-off households and struggling to pay the farmers a decent wage. Where to begin? How to reach people struggling most to access good quality food? How can we pay good producers a fair price?

1. Bidding rounds

In this model, the farm draws up a budget for the year which they share with the members. The farm says how many people/households can be fed by the farm and invites that many people to participate as members. The members attend an annual meeting and are told the

average price of a share that would allow the farm to break even. Each member makes an offer for how much they would like to pay. These are added up. If the total is insufficient to cover the budget, the process is repeated. If bids exceed the budget, the community decide what to do with the excess.

The amount each member pays does not determine how much food they get or their voting rights. No body is means tested; they simply decide how much they want/are able to contribute.

It is possible to run several different bidding rounds for different products eg a veg share or a meat share. This only works of course if people in food need are in the room and have overcome the many non-financial barriers to participation.

Example from Germany

2. Bursary

Members are invited to pay extra into a bursary fund. This payment is optional, additional to the price of a regular share. Some households receive free or reduced price shares.

There is an issue here about 'who chooses'. Relatively privileged people who can afford two boxes of food decide to give a household in need, who has less choice, a box of organic vegetables. There is a case for giving the household in need the cash instead, so that they can make their own choices about what to do with it. A box of organic vegetables might not be top of their list.

Example: Stroud Community Agriculture, Torth Y Tir Bakery

3. CSA partners a food poverty project

We are calling this model POSH (Partnership of Supplier and Hub) until we come up with a better name for it! It's marked yellow because it is one of the few that addresses all of the needs and I would like to see it widely promoted.

The CSA concentrates on what it does best: producing great food. Its members are often well off and it asks them to 'buy another one for someone that needs it' and gets the full price for this food.

The CSA partners a poverty project that has good relationships with people in food need and is addressing their whole-life issues in a community building way eg running cooking classes or community cafes. The food poverty project distributes the high quality food.

The PARTNERSHIP aspect of this model is important. Both groups will be short of time but finding ways to understand the needs and resources of each other and to begin to make stronger relationships (eg farm visits for struggling families) is part of the beauty of it. The farm may discover that the food poverty project is very good at using unpopular, bulk or glut items (eg making meatballs from offal or distributing 500 cauliflowers in a day). The farm can use the

CSA member's solidarity payments to pay for sending otherwise hard to sell high quality food to a place where it is popular.

Examples:

The PFLA is interested in this model and has set up several partnerships with pasture fed farmers who direct retail meat and food hubs, including the Trinity Rooms in Stroud and Edinburgh Cyrenians.

Edible Futures CSA supplying Borderlands in Bristol. In this case, CSA supporters can pay for a 'solidarity box'. The CSA delivers food to Borderlands, a refugee project which is expert at engaging, empowering and supporting refugees. Borderlands runs a refugee café and drop in and provides free food to take away from the drop in.

Cae Tan CSA donates food to a food bank and does Soul Farm in Falmouth

Tamar Grow Local partner a housing association.

There are large scale and elaborate examples of this kind of model in Just Food New York Their network links 120 CSAs with the city.

4. Food co-ops

Consumers, who may be in food need, democratically organise as a food co-op and bulk buy at reduced prices from a supplier. The food co-op can source from an existing CSA or make an affordable bulk purchase from a farm, on partnership terms.

Co-operation towns has information about forming a food co-op.

Example: Go Local Food. In addition to farm produce, they buy in other ethical produce and sell it at less than retail prices.

5. Work shares

Members work for their produce, sometimes there are also paying members.

Example: Slad Farm Vegetable Garden, Oak Tree Low Carbon Farm

6. Pay it forward via a third organisation

You could use an organisation that sells food to offer 'pay it forward' options on CSA shares. For example, JQ Food Hub in Birmingham and Chagfood sell Pay it Forward veg boxes.

7. Fundraising event

You could hold an annual solidarity barn dance, meal, or other event, perhaps in partnership with a community poverty project and sell tickets to raise funds for subsidised boxes. For example Steepholding CSA.

8. Gift box

When veg shares are collected, members put any unwanted items in the 'gift box'. Any excess from the farm or produce that is unsuitable for regular shares can be added, along with gifts from home allotments or elsewhere. Anyone who wants it, takes it.

Example: Stroud Community Agriculture and Canalside do this on a small scale.

9. Gleaning

Many areas, including urban areas, have volunteer gleaning groups who collect unwanted produce, usually for food poverty groups to distribute. If a CSA has produce that is not needed, a gleaning group could harvest it. For more information about gleaning and map of gleaning groups.

10. Healthy Start Vouchers

The government issues Healthy Start Vouchers to pregnant women and young children in low income families. CSAs can accept these and receive the cash value. Take up in many areas is low but CSAs can encourage take up and register to accept payment from the government. Eg Teign Greens and Camel CSA accept Healthy Start vouchers.

11. Flexible share offers and payments

It may help some people to participate if you just arrange your existing food offer differently. Do you offer a share small enough for a single elderly person? Do you allow weekly payments rather than asking for large lump sums? Do you allow people to have holidays from membership when they are short of cash for a few weeks? Do you allow people to choose payment schedules to fit around their payday? Do you make collections easy for families without a car? Is it easy to subscribe without a computer?

Eg Camel CSA offer weekly payments

12. Bring and share meals

CSA members organise bring and share meals which can be open to locals. Everyone brings an item of food to share, which is put out on a large buffet table, from which everyone fills their plate. Many CSA members will cook and share farm produce. People on low incomes can bring whatever they have but eat well, with their kids. Be careful to explain in advance what will happen and that all offerings are welcome and make it easy for people to be discrete about what they bring. Make it clear that all contributions matter - not just the food you bring but your company or time washing up.

Eg Canalside CSA

Blackgrove Greens offer regular free meals for volunteers

13. A food justice social enterprise

You can set up a profit making enterprise such as a café or pop-up restaurant alongside your CSA to raise an income to subsidise food poverty work.

Example: Brighton One Church run a farmers market stall

14. Sliding scales

Some CSAs charge for food according to means and offer the same food for different prices according to either self identified level of wealth or criteria such as being in receipt of benefits. If you are worried about making the budget stack up without knowing what prices your food will sell at, you can limit the number of cheaper shares on offer.

Example: Soul Farm

15. Using your distribution set up

Food poverty groups usually need a mailing list of supporters, a venue to pack and store food, distribution, and ordering system, contacts with producers who might supply them and contacts with producers who might have food surpluses that they can distribute. CSAs have this infrastructure already. Have a chat with your local groups and apply some creative thinking. Could you double up as a collection point for food waste? Could your drivers deliver for the food bank as well? Check out what they need and see if anything is an easy fit.

Food equality projects often rely mainly on surplus food. They might not be well networked with food producers. If you can identify surplus food that the food poverty networks don't already know about (eg offal at your abattoir) there might be a food group that is well set up to use it. Some have freezers and make ready meals and are very resourceful with surplus food.

16. Wage equity model

In this model, the farmers work present to members the costs of running the farm divided by how many members there are, plus how many hours of labour it takes to produce each box. Members are invited to pay the farmers the same rate per hour as they are paid themselves. This may need some adjustment for wealthier members who receive income from pensions, shares, rent, etc rather than wage labour.

Example from Holland (right click to translate)

17. Grants

While it might be difficult to get grant funding for your trading activities, you may be eligible for grant funding to address disadvantage. Most grants are short term, while the need is long term and you will need the right legal structure and skills and time to apply for and manage a grant.

Example : Cae Tan, Blackgrove Greens

Not just food

Whether or not a CSA offers low cost food, it can still ensure it is friendly and accessible to all and can play an important part in protecting households at risk of food poverty by being inclusive, offering skills and training, welcoming volunteers, helping community networks and protecting mental health by connection with nature. Being welcome in a strong community can leave us feeling confident and inspired. When we need income or support, often the

people we know give us pointers to new opportunities. Whether or not your CSA provides low cost food, reach out and try to welcome all in your community activities, including training and employment.

To do this really well requires reaching out and understanding who lives in your area. In most communities there will be people unable to go out shopping, not necessarily on a low income. They may never hear about your CSA. If they do, they may need you to organise a neighbour to collect for them. There are probably adults with learning difficulties, possibly looking after children, probably eating takeaways. They may be unable to make an online order or cook without support. Perhaps what they need is a volunteer to make a healthy meal from your veg box. Being proactive and dynamic about diversity in all that you do will make a difference.

The CSA network has a vision for there to be a CSA in every neighbourhood. CSAs that are initiated, designed and owned from within disadvantaged groups are most likely to meet needs effectively; where you can, share your model and support new CSAs to begin, especially in populations in food need.



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