Supplying Agroecological Food to Food Poverty Organisations: Key Issues to Consider

Introduction

The Real Farming Trust (RFT) is committed to increasing access to agroecological food and addressing food injustice. At first glance, supplying high quality agroecological food to people that would otherwise go hungry is a win-win. Indeed, it supports good farming and feeds people good food. Agroecological food is better for both nature and the environment, and everyone should have fair access to good food. We have found however through our Food Justice work that it is difficult and complex to make such interventions in a meaningful and effective way.

This document outlines factors to consider and offers recommendations to those engaging in this work. Grounding findings in our experience of being involved in food justice projects and knowledge shared from our partners on the ground, it gives insight to both the agroecological and local food project contexts and covers issues ranging from nutritional need and social considerations, to supply chain and infrastructure. It also offers testimonials directly from our projects on tried and tested interventions and activities.

It should be noted that RFT recognises that local food projects are not a solution to poverty. Neither poverty, nor emergency food support, should exist. Likewise, government policy should prevent farms from harming the environment and should support agroecological farms to thrive in a fair food system. Whilst working to relieve the impacts of food insecurity for those most in need, RFT continues to call for system change towards a world of good food, for everyone, forever.

Who is this for?

This document seeks to guide and support individuals and organisations who wish to design, fund and deliver projects that provide access to agroecological food for households in poverty through methods such as pairing farmers with local food projects.

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Our experience

The Real Farming Trust exists to promote agroecological farming, which includes justice in our food system. We have been working with communities to improve our food systems through our Food Justice projects since 2019. In Extended Table, we work closely with four organisations across the country, using food based activities to build social connections and strengthen often marginalised communities. In Twinning, we paired four Community Supported Agriculture projects with four geographically close urban social justice organisations, using shared experiences around food and farming to build connections across communities. Through our research and evaluation, we gather evidence to understand what does and doesn't work in these food justice settings, with findings spanning social issues, supply chain, finance and logistics.

RFT also has experience working directly with food producers, especially small agroecological farmers throughout our history. See our LEAP programme, which funds and mentors small agroecological businesses, for further information.

Key issues to consider

This section explores key issues to bring into consideration when working towards supplying food poverty projects with agroecological produce. The sections are as follows:

1. Nutrition and Choice
2. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption
3. Meeting people where they are
4. 'Food poverty' and social support
5. Sourcing, supply chains and planning
6. Infrastructure at food projects
7. Farmers' and retailers' needs and constraints
8. Lack of understanding

1. Nutrition and choice

Food banks used to mainly provide only emergency food to cover short term hardship. Yet we increasingly see many households having to use them continuously. This means the food provided in food poverty projects affects overall diet, rather than just being emergency relief, and so that the cultural and nutritional aspects of food arriving at projects is important.

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Presently, many food projects use surplus food. Deliveries are unpredictable, and often insufficient for communities' needs. The deliveries often include short date fruit and veg, with food projects often spending any budget they have to supplement surplus with extra non-perishable food items like pasta, gravy granules and tea bags, in order to make up a useful and balanced parcel. Understanding existing sourcing and supply chains, especially surplus, is necessary before introducing new agroecological products. For more information about the use of surplus food, please see our surplus food briefing from the Ready Healthy Eat project.

Whilst food poverty projects are diverse in their food needs, many lack sufficient protein. Investment in supplies of appropriate protein (eg Halal meat) might be more valuable to some projects and better for health outcomes than more vegetables, even agroecological ones. Agroecological protein tends to be much more expensive than standard protein, with the cost difference between agroecological and standard products being much larger for meat than for fruit and vegetables.

Many food poverty projects do not have enough food to meet their community's needs, with many surplus food distributors having waiting lists for surplus food. With people in need often turned away, projects in this situation will often seek to spend budget on a higher volume of food, especially with nutritious value, than on more expensive food with better environmental impact, as agroecological produce often is.

Similarly, households in poverty would often not prioritise additional spending on agroecological food if given the option. When accessing food crisis support, people often have little agency over the foods provided to them and so are not able to make choices about their own diets. This puts many people off attending food projects. The question of who gets to choose what food arrives at food projects is political. Decisions to make supply healthier or more environmentally friendly should always be made with, not for, the project's recipients. Putting spending power directly into the hands of those most in need is often the best way to maintain agency and dignity.

For the reasons outlined, if food poverty projects are supported by grants to buy agroecological food, financial factors and the need to source as much food as possible to combat immediate hunger may likely result in projects returning to standard or cheaper foods in the long term even despite understanding the benefits of agroecological systems.

Read more from our summary on nutrition in community food projects from our Ready Healthy Eat programme here.

2. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption

Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption is a large scale and urgent priority. There are significant life expectancy gaps between rich and poor demographics, often diet related and corresponding to large differences in fruit and vegetable consumption.

Offering free fruit and vegetables is an obvious place to start. But to be effective, complexities on the ground must be understood.

> '*We trialled offering free organic veg boxes from the farm at the food bank, where the rest of the food provided is ambient; tins, boxes of cereal, pasta etc. At the end of the session the veg boxes were still there. Our clients did not take them home. We had to pay for their disposal*' (A Cornish food bank).

No two households are the same, and there are many factors affecting low uptake of fruit and veg. Investment in addressing those factors are often more effective than simply providing free fruit and veg. They include:

- Lack of facilities at home (cooker, fridge, cooking equipment).
- Lack of time, energy, skill or enthusiasm to cook or try new experiences. People in food poverty are more likely to be time poor, work long hours, have disabilities, or have additional caring responsibilities. In this context, choosing efficiency and convenience in eating is a rational choice.
- Cultural and social issues. Cooking alone is often unappealing. People may not have grown up in a household that cooks from scratch. Some farm products may be unrecognisable, or perceived as dirty or muddy.
- Transport. Many travel to food support organisations without access to a car, needing to pick up as much as possible until their next visit which can be up to 2 weeks away. This means recipients must often prioritise foods which have the highest calorific content, will stay fresh over a longer period, and are not bulky. And so fruit and vegetables are often less convenient.
- Children's food choices. With limited time, food options, and opportunities to treat the kids, cooking a meal that the family might not like is a risk for households in poverty. The fewer resources available, the less easy it is to experiment with new foods, and familiar, quick dinners are prioritised.

> *'We've had veg boxes but we stopped […] been a bit off and on with that. Me and my husband all eat vegetables but it's quite hard to get fussy teenagers to eat what we want. So, it's kind of sat there we thought, "Why are we paying premium for this stuff when we can't eat everything in it?" I mean, I do think veg boxes are good. I think, I don't mind some unpredictability, but I think sometimes you get a box full of stuff and it's a bit like: "I have no idea what to do with this!"'* (Extended Table participant).

In order to provide the most effective food support, time should be taken to understand people's whole lives before investing in simply increasing fruit and vegetable provision.

3. Meeting people where they are

There are many social, financial and cultural steps between a household relying on highly processed food and welcoming an organic veg box.

> *'We did try buying in organic tins of tomatoes for our cooking classes. In that group, we were working with people who were unused to cooking from scratch. Actually it was better to use cheap brands of tomatoes at the cook school because we wanted people to be able to go home and repeat for themselves what they cooked here, with familiar affordable ingredients'* (Staff from an Extended Table partner).

> *'Some people will go on from the cooking classes to our therapeutic garden. Then we can start to talk about fresh veg and look at nature and food. Not yet though'* (Staff from an Extended Table partner).

When working towards increasing supply of organic or agroecological foods to food poverty projects, organisations should be realistic about starting points and scope for improvement. For example it is often more appropriate to aim for adding a vegetable into a simple staple meal than to offer a seasonal vegan meal with foods people do not recognise. It is more realistic to aim for incremental improvements to nutrition than for a perfect agroecological meal.

4. 'Food poverty' and social support

At RFT we believe in the view that 'food poverty' is not a helpful distinction to make, but rather that poverty as a whole affects many areas of a person's life - such as food, health,

housing, or community. We also support the case for 'cash first' responses to food support to those in poverty: increasing people's access to money, rather than simply giving out food. Food provision alone is not an answer to poverty. Food projects working with those in poverty generally offer food in addition to wider support. This additional support can cover offers such as social eating spaces, good microwave ready meals, childcare support, benefits advice, better transport to existing shops, and cooking classes, all of which can help relieve poverty and also support food access.

> *'The project helped me feel more connected and I think in terms of mental health made me feel more positive. Like I was talking before about - just feeling, you know, everything's awful and I can't do anything about it. And it's kind of helped me get out of that mindset and say, yeah, things are difficult, but you can do something about it and in a way things have been difficult before and you got through it and you'll get through it again'* (Extended Table participant).

Social situations are a good place to begin to talk about dietary habits, food systems and even environmental issues. Agroecological food is likely to work best when provided alongside funding for social support. The social support work is skilled, often poorly funded and usually best provided close to home.

Most people who are food insecure do not go to food access projects. There are many reasons for this including time, shame, travel, inappropriate food or social offer, or geography. Without community networks it is very difficult to provide food directly to people in need, or to identify them. Farmers are not well set up to do this work.

5. Sourcing, supply chains and planning

When supplying food projects with agroecological produce, supply chains and networks need to be understood. Processes like wholesaling, storing, ordering and delivery require attention.

Funding food projects to source directly from farms may be unrealistic in many instances. Many farms produce products which are not ready to be eaten (but rather animals, or unprocessed dairy or grain, or tankers of unprocessed milk), which wouldn't be appropriate to provide for a local food project. Many also produce high volumes of only a single product, where it wouldn't be feasible for small food projects to oversee

arrangements for single ingredients. Not all food projects will have a market garden nearby, which have an uneven geographical distribution.

To turn farm produce into ready-to-eat food, networks of infrastructure including drying rooms, juicing and bottling plants, dairies, butchers, mills and cold stores are needed. Existing infrastructure that is in place has become increasingly geared to large scale supermarket supply and inaccessible to small producers. Agroecological farms often work at a small scale and so face additional hurdles with limitations to processing, distribution and access to market. These economies of scale mean that it is usually cheaper to buy from supermarkets than direct from farms.

Supplying processed agroecological food from retailers and processors (e.g. bread, peanut butter, ready meals, yoghurt, sausages) may often be more practical than supplying products direct from farms. It may also be more efficient to invest in processing or in wholesaling than funding increased sourcing direct from the farm, although this would require capital investment, robust business plans, and a viable supply chain.

With the right infrastructure in place, there is potential for food projects and the public sector to provide a large scale market for out of spec produce (e.g. gluts). Those which use surplus produce are already accustomed to responding creatively to unpredictable food supplies. Food projects are a flexible market, serving a large chunk of the population, with 10-20% of households being food insecure, and collectively with quite a large spend on ingredients. Most shop individually and do not organise to bulk buy collectively.

It should also be noted that food projects often have only a small food budget, and that the food purchases they make are unpredictable due to the previously mentioned unpredictability of surplus deliveries. This makes it hard to set up consistent purchasing for an agroecological supplier.

> *'We spend £250,000 on fruit and veg per quarter. We buy it at Lidl and pay their retail prices. We considered buying wholesale but there are not many wholesalers around that can supply us and their wholesale prices are actually higher than Lidl'* (A food bank in Cornwall).

6. Infrastructure at food projects

Where food projects source products directly from farms, investment in infrastructure at the food project can help strengthen impact. Delivering fruit and veg at a food project is

not always considered helpful on its own. For food projects to be able to increase their food distribution, they must spend time and money to connect with recipient communities, and must also have the capacity for more storage, distribution and waste disposal. It is one thing receiving a gift of a van load of cabbages; it is a skilled and expensive task to distribute them to people in need of food need. Resources for engagement and distribution are often better placed than additional food.

There is no central register of food distribution projects. Only few areas where community food projects are most connected are able to direct food to where it is best used, or organise collective bulk orders. In these well-networked mostly urban locations, there may be well organised supply chains and perhaps a coordinator or large distributor managing the delivery chain to direct food to the appropriate local projects. Others, most often rural, are small-scale, not connected with other projects, and with grassroots, non-linear supply chains. There is diversity in food project infrastructure, with some being able to cook and store fresh food and accept deliveries throughout the week, and others simply having a cupboard to store ambient good which is open just a few hours in a week

> *'Now we have our catering kitchen in the community centre, we can accept all those August courgettes from the farm and make them into meals that people like. The courgettes never used to go from the food bank but people enjoy them in cooked meals now'* (a community kitchen in Gloucestershire).

> *'No thanks, we do not want fresh veg at our food pantry. We have no cold store and we only open once a week. The church let us use a cupboard under the stairs where the cleaning stuff is kept. We would love you to bring us some tins though, we never have enough of tins'* (a rural food pantry in Yorkshire).

> *'We do not accept any fresh food because we cannot deal with food safety regulation. We only have a couple of part time volunteers here. We also cannot break up and repack large packs because of the labelling regulations. We just use tins and dry food'* (an urban food pantry).

7. Farmers and retailers' needs and constraints

No two farms or farmers are the same but many farmers are squeezed, with small profit margins, long working hours, and relying on the success of one or two food products. They

rely on a guaranteed market and price before planting, however weather can make it hard to predict what will be produced, and market prices at the end of the season can fluctuate wildly.

Many farmers also work alone in rural areas and are not connected to networks of different people. There are many barriers and constraints on their ability to engage in community development work or reach out to households in need. Most farmers would have little capacity to produce extra food for people in need or to deliver it.

Independent food retailers and distributors have similar limitations. They prefer regular customers, who order and pay predictably. Some food retailers do not want new one-off or irregular customers because they already have their market and prioritise serving their reliable existing customers. There is also a cost to each transaction and delivery so retailers often prefer a few large regular customers.

It can be difficult to identify and communicate with the most suitable farms or retailers to supply a food project. They are diverse in the scale they work at and the foods they provide, making matching with equally diverse food projects a challenge.

> *'We were approached by a food bank asking us to give them food. They thought we had tons of food on the farm and were making money and were rich landowners. We had to explain that we are not making profit and cannot just give away our product. In any case, they had no means to collect food from the farm and we have no capacity to be driving it around town. I work 12 hour day'* (organic farmer in Gloucestershire).

8. Lack of understanding

When working to connect farmers to food projects, it is important that all stakeholders understand the wider impact of their actions in our complex food systems. Some social food projects have purchasing policies that inadvertently contribute to hunger elsewhere, for example, because of poor farm labour contracts in other countries. Many farmers may not have an understanding of the needs and options of people reliant on food support. Meaningful projects require strong relationships, ample time, curiosity, and conversation across differences. Many farmers and food projects are very busy dealing with the immediate issues and do not have time to invest in strategic system changes.

Direct partnerships between food projects and farmers give the best opportunity to find practical solutions. With both parties occupied in busy front line work, any time spent

towards building such partnerships including finding appropriate partners should be supported and paid for.

The two quotes below demonstrate the some of the lack of understanding that may be present between farms and food banks.

> *'I'm a food bank manager. I handle 5 tons of food per week. We buy it mainly at Tesco. I have never had a conversation with a farmer'* (large Scottish food bank).

> *'If only poor people would take the trouble to learn to cook, then they could feed their kids my organic food, cheaply cooked from scratch. They complain about expensive food but just need to make more effort'* (organic farmer, who has never visited a food bank).

Testimonials on what has already worked from RFT projects

Below are outlined some quotes from RFT's Food Justice programme partners of food poverty projects using paid-for agroecological food. Note that this is an exception amongst food poverty projects.

Solidarity payments and sourcing dry goods from a wholesaler.

Hornbeam Centre -
'We run a weekly solidarity supermarket supplied by SUMA. They are an ethical wholefood wholesaler, including organic goods. We bulk buy. People pay different amounts according to means. There is a wider social scene at the community centre and that helps with engagement. People do pay for their food and it feels like a shop so it is dignified, people like it.'

'We also have sliding scales for our meals, so some people have subsidised lunches with farm food.'

Partnering with a farm

Edinburgh Cyrenians -
'We partner with Peelham farm, which produces and sells high quality organic meat. They ask their existing customers to 'buy another one for someone that needs it' and bring us the meat, which they have been paid for. Sometimes we can make use of cuts that are less popular with their customers.' - To find out how to replicate this model, see LUSH.

'We have partnered with an organic farm in Italy and bulk buy oranges direct from them. Cutting out the middle man helps with finances.' - See more details here.

Hornbeam Centre -
'We have a close relationship with our sister project, Organic Lea Farm. We visit each other and understand each others' enterprises. We can source food in ways that work.

Community Kitchens and processing gluts

Brighton and Hove Food Partnership -
'We have a community kitchen with skilled cooks and can make use of bulk cheap blemished vegetables. Sometimes we can find quite cheap organic local food that way.'

'We set up a dehydrator to process gluts, like apples in autumn. We can make complete dehydrated meals. These are a good replacement for people eating pot noodles who don't have kitchen facilities.' For more information about setting up a community dehydrator see here.

Gardens at community kitchens

Brighton and Hove Food Partnership -
'We run therapeutic gardening sessions with volunteers, which people love. Sometimes there is enough food to bring into the community kitchen.'

On-farm outdoor kitchens

CAE Tan organic CSA farm -
'We built a simple outdoor kitchen and community groups cook and eat food direct from the field next door. I think this model could bring an income for farms if they sold meals and an experience rather than just vegetables.'

Grant funded food purchase

NOW Group -
'The food costs for our social project with people with learning disabilities is quite small overall. We bake, so we need flour mainly. We tried to buy local some organic flour.'

Sympathetic wholesalers

Edinburgh Cyrenians -
'We buy flour direct from an organic mill, using the grant money. We only buy small quantities but they know we are a homeless charity and give us wholesale prices.'

Organic veg wholesaler -
'We are quite a large business and have delivery runs into many cities. We would like more people to be eating better food. Where we can, we will include a large food poverty project on our customer list. They need to order at least a pallet load at a time of course.'

In summary

Providing agroecological food to households in food need is difficult and complex. Whilst it is perhaps not the most efficient way to improve diets or finance agroecological farms, there are many benefits to such efforts. Any partnerships must be well-researched, collaborative, and mindful of context, responding to the range of social and production needs outlined in this document.

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For further information about this document or RFT's Food Justice work, contact Jade Bashford, Food Justice Programme Manager at jade.bashford@realfarming.org.

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