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Capacity Building for Food Justice in England: the Contribution of Charity-Led Community Food Initiatives

SPECIAL ISSUE ON FOOD JUSTICE

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This paper discusses the extent to which charity-led initiatives can contribute to capacity building for food justice in England. The paper draws on evaluations of two projects run by the charity Garden Organic: the Master Gardener Programme, operating a network of volunteers who mentor households, schools and community groups to support local food growing, and the Sowing New Seeds programme, which engages ‘Seed Stewards’ to work with communities to encourage the growing and cooking of ‘exotic’ crops. Based on qualitative data about peoples’ motivations for participation and the benefits that are experienced, we interpret these projects as examples of capacity building for food justice. We suggest that whilst currently de-politicised, the ‘quiet’ process of re-skilling and awareness raising that occurs through shared gardening projects could have transformative potential for people’s relationship with food. Finally, we use our findings to raise critical questions and propose future research about food justice concepts and practices.

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Introduction

Over recent years, the concept of ‘food justice’ has generated interest amongst researchers, activists and campaigners concerned with the rise of food poverty in the UK. A number of conferences and workshops on the topic have been hosted by grassroots movements, researchers and advocacy groups, and in 2016 the charity Church Action on Poverty launched a campaign to tackle the ‘scandal of food poverty’ and ‘build a food justice movement’. Food justice movements build on the notion of the right to food, and there is already a body of critical scholarship advocating for a rights-based approach to solving food poverty in the UK (Dowler and O’Connor 2012, Dowler and Caraher 2014, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015). As well as considering the policy and political strategies necessary to defend the right to food, advocates of food justice usually argue that communities and citizens (particularly those most marginalised by the current food system) should have a central and fundamental role in tackling food injustice ‘from the ground up’. As such, food justice projects often try to promote community food growing, local food systems, and community enterprise or trade networks. Thus, as noted by Cadieux and Slocum (2015, p. 5) “discourses of ownership, empowerment, and control figure prominently in the food justice literature”. Yet despite ample popular interest in gardening, allotments, home cooking and health, there has been relatively little critical analysis of the role of community food production in tackling food injustices in England. In fact, there are only a handful of studies on community gardening and allotments in the UK (Milbourne 2012), and still fewer examples of published research that situate community food production in a social, environmental or food justice framework (an exception is Tornaghi 2014).

Many community food growing initiatives have been established and/or funded by charities and so the aim of this paper is to consider the extent to which such interventions could be mobilised towards a food justice agenda for England. We draw on detailed evaluations of two projects run by the UK's leading organic horticulture charity, Garden Organic (GO). One project is the 'Master Gardener Programme' (MG), and the other is 'Sowing New Seeds' (SNS). Both initiatives consist of volunteer-based networks that mentor households, individuals and groups to grow food in a range of spaces, from community gardens or allotments, to school gardens, back gardens, window-sills and balconies. We have conducted evaluations of both of these programmes since 2011, which has enabled us to gain a unique insight into the operation of the networks, the motivations of those taking part, and the impact of participation. The evaluations were commissioned by GO in order to assess the extent to which the programmes were delivering on their stated objectives.

For this paper, we are reinterpreting the results of the evaluations from a food justice perspective. We begin with an overview of community gardening and food justice issues in the UK, with a particular focus on food poverty. We then sketch a brief history of GO, which we interpret as a 'quietly radical' charity (inspired by Smith and Jehlička's notion of 'quiet sustainability,' 2013). We next present a summary of qualitative data about the motivations for participation in the MG and SNS programmes. Highlighting the strengths and limits of these interventions, we interpret them as examples of 'capacity building' for food justice, through 'quiet' steps rather than 'radical transformation.' We argue that whilst currently de-politicised, the re-skilling and awareness raising that occurs through these shared gardening projects could have transformative potential for people's relationship with food. At the same time, we caution against expecting charities to be able to deliver food

justice alone, and discuss why their contribution has to be valued but also kept in critical perspective.

Community Food Production and Food Justice in England

Although exact figures are not available, participation in community and domestic food production seems to have grown in the UK. At least 1,000 community gardens and 200 city and school farms are supported by The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG 2015), and there are about 330,000 allotments (Miller 2015), many of which have waiting lists. The number of people who reported growing their own food increased from 4% to about 14% of the population between 2003 and 2007 (Church *et al.* 2015).

There is a broad consensus that community gardens in the UK are capable of delivering public health and well-being, educational, and social benefits such as increased social capital and improved inter-ethnic and inter-generational relationships (Caraher and Dowler 2007, Firth *et al.* 2011, Milbourne 2012). Nevertheless, the ability of such projects to contribute to broader political goals of restructuring food systems into more socially just and environmentally sustainable forms has been questioned. Bell and Cerulli (2012, p. 35), for instance, in their study of a community garden in London conclude that they “make significant contributions to their local communities and neighbourhoods, but their impact on urban food systems remain limited”. Pudup (2008), amongst others, has argued that North American community gardens are mechanisms that enable the dominant neoliberal system to persist, by allowing it to accommodate crises, which hit down hard at the local scale. Through community gardening, vulnerable people in society are cared for and helped to survive by voluntary and community sector organisations in the absence of state

responsibility or safety nets (see also McClintock 2014). In the UK however, Milbourne (2012, p. 955) found “little evidence to suggest that the UK projects [community gardens] have been initiated in response to the withdrawal of the (local) state from key areas of welfare provision” and actually, “the absence of the local state provided opportunities as well as constraints allowing them to wrestle back control of local space and to produce more meaningful and democratic community spaces.”

Whereas some critics argue that community gardens and other urban agricultural forms remain locked within, and indeed reproduce the capitalist logic of neoliberalism, others see transformative potential in the practice of ‘political gardening.’ This can reclaim communal spaces in the city (Certomà and Tornaghi 2015, Purcell and Tyman 2015), re-skill citizens in the knowledge of food growing, preparation and enjoyment and create critical awareness of – and strategies for addressing - food injustices. Focusing on home food production in Australia for example, Larder *et al.* (2015: p 57) argue that the values and beliefs of backyard gardeners “demonstrate understandings and pathways for (re)making contemporary food systems” and that “the politics of hope and possibility articulated by backyard gardeners resonates with the broader rights-based food democracy agenda and, in doing so, situates backyard gardening within the broader tapestry of food sovereignty movements.” Similarly, Milbourne (2012, p. 954) found that the cross-cutting theme throughout all of the community gardens he studied was the desire to address ‘everyday’ forms of environmental injustice, such as the abandonment, despoilment or absence of everyday green spaces, or the loss of control over street spaces. More recently, Crossan *et al.* (2016) have theorised that ‘radical possibilities’ are nascent in Glasgow’s community gardens, where more ‘active’ forms of citizenship are being nurtured through participatory democracy and collective approaches to urban problem solving.

Food Justice Issues in the United Kingdom

Food banks have become a focal point around which food justice debates have developed in the UK. From being an unknown concept a decade ago, most towns now have at least one food bank. The Trussell Trust runs the largest national network of over 400 food banks but there are also many local initiatives such as soup kitchens, homeless shelters and migrant and refugee centres. The rise in food bank usage, with a million instances of assistance provided by the Trussell Trust in 2015-16, has provoked a storm of criticism directed at the government's welfare cuts; a number of reports have identified reductions, sanctions and/or delays in benefits payments, as major reasons why people turn to food banks (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014; Garthwaite *et al.* 2015).

The Fabian Commission (2015) report on food and poverty makes clear that whilst the rapid rise in food bank usage in the UK is one indicator of food insecurity, it by no means represents the full extent of food poverty. For example, food bank usage is usually a last resort for people in crisis, and so the figures do not capture the long term, grinding food poverty experienced by those on low incomes. Unlike the USA and Canada, however, there is no regular state monitoring of household food insecurity or food poverty in the UK or in England specifically, despite repeated calls for the government to implement it². Yet, there can be little doubt that conditions have worsened for lower income residents, including those in low-paid work and insecure or 'zero hours' contracts. With several 'spikes' along the way, real food prices rose by almost 8% between 2007 and 2014 (Defra 2014) and real wages fell consistently between 2010 and 2013 (Taylor *et al.* 2014). As in many other developed and

² The coalition government refused this request in spring 2015:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmenvfru/1148/114804.htm#a8>

emerging economies, the cost of healthy foods also rose more quickly than the cost of unhealthy foods (Wiggins and Keats 2015), meaning that people with lower incomes face a relatively greater financial struggle to eat healthy diets. This is often compounded by the lack of space and equipment for preparing and cooking meals experienced by those living in poor quality housing, plus irregular working hours which make meal planning difficult, as well as the relatively higher concentration of fast food outlets in lower income areas (Maguire et al 2015).

The context for this paper then is a situation whereby there has been a rapid (although officially un-measured) growth in the numbers of people participating in community food growing, alongside highly public evidence of the existence of food injustice, such as the growth in food banks, persistent inequalities in diet-related ill-health and the relatively higher cost of ‘healthy’ calories compared to ‘unhealthy’ ones. In this paper, we argue that whilst community food growing can provide spaces of transition to food justice, the people who engage and practice growing in these spaces do not always perceive themselves as political actors with a coherent ‘transformational’ agenda. Rather, they practice food growing for a multitude of reasons, which may, perhaps ‘unintentionally’, contribute to a broader, gradual change in societal relationships with and to food. This point resonates with Smith and Jehlička’s (2013, p. 155) notion of ‘quiet sustainability’, which they define as:

“practices that result in beneficial environmental or social outcomes, that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions, and that are not represented by the practitioners as relating directly to environmental or sustainability goals. Cultures of sharing, repairing, gifting and bartering characterise quiet sustainability.

Everyday practices that have low environmental impacts, but that have not been pursued for that reason, are also features of the concept.”

They argue that the people who grow, consume and share their own food in Poland and the Czech Republic associate the practice with joy, exuberance, generosity, care and skill. This does not necessarily challenge the ‘politics of hope and possibility’ that Larder *et al.* (2015) identified amongst Australian gardeners, but it does raise an important point about how the motivations and practices of *some* growers can be recognised as *unintentionally* aligned with food justice movements. Similarly, Visser *et al.* (2015, p. 525) draw on these ideas to propose the concept of ‘quiet food sovereignty’ which “does not challenge the overall food system directly through its produce, claims, or ideas, but focuses on individual economic benefits and ecological production for personal health, as well as culturally appropriate forms of sociality, generated by the exchange of self-produced food.” Their claims are derived from empirical work in Russia, a very different context to England, but as with Smith and Jehlička (2013), it highlights the point that many grassroots community gardening initiatives are considered apolitical, rather than initiated as conduits for systemic change. The potential for food justice could therefore be ‘latent’ amongst communities who do not ‘loudly’ express or even position their activities as a clear response to the injustices associated with broader food systems.

The next section introduces the case study of GO and its volunteer-led gardening and growing networks, before moving on to illustrate the ways in which these initiatives are able to empower, reconnect and re-skill the people involved.

Garden Organic: a quietly radical charity

Founded in 1954, GO (formerly the Henry Doubleday Research Association) has become one of the largest horticultural organisations in Europe. With around 40,000 supporters, it has been a pioneer of citizen science, running members' experiments to test out different seeds, growing media, composting techniques and so on over many years. At its 22 acre site near Coventry, it ran field-scale trials funded by government and other donors and it also developed an international arm to promote organic growing in developing countries. Through the 1990s and 2000s, however, it became increasingly difficult to sustain these activities, as governments reduced their funding for agricultural research and gradually the field trials and overseas initiatives were scaled back.

In 2005, the charity re-focused its energies around gardening and communities in the UK. It now offers organic growing advice including online materials, educational activities, training courses and publications. Its 'Master Composter' programme, in conjunction with relevant county councils or waste partnerships, trains volunteers to promote and support composting activities in local communities³. The MG and SNS programmes were modelled on this successful initiative.

The Master Gardener Programme

Launched in 2010, the MG programme was funded by the Big Lottery Local Food Fund⁴. The overall aim is to 'provide local support and advice for growing food' (Master Gardener 2016). Master Gardeners 'offer [households] the reasons to grow food, remove barriers

³ <http://www.homecomposting.org.uk/master-composters-mainmenu-36>

⁴ Local Food was a £60 million programme that distributed grants to a variety of food-related projects which were helping to make locally grown food accessible to local communities between 2008 and 2014, supported by the Big Lottery Fund and managed by The Wildlife Trusts (Wildlife Trusts 2016).

against, and offer support with growing skills’ (ibid). The programme has attracted Public Health⁵ funding in several counties and also runs in Her Majesty’s Prison Rye Hill where it is used to support prisoners in their recovery from substance abuse (Brown *et al.* 2016). Volunteers are trained (free of cost to them) by GO to become ‘Master Gardeners’. There is no ‘pre-requisite’ to becoming a Master Gardener apart from enthusiasm and commitment and once volunteers have completed their training, they provide 12 months free growing advice to up to 10 households or ‘supported growers’, (including community groups and schools) in their local community. The role of a Master Gardener is to: 1) promote food growing in their community, 2) regularly mentor households, and 3) provide feedback to volunteer coordinators. There are no eligibility criteria for households receiving free growing advice from a Master Gardener. Households and Master Gardeners interact as frequently as they like, by their preferred method (for example email, telephone, face to face). In each area a volunteer coordinator is employed to locally manage and recruit Master Gardeners and provide training to new volunteers. For its first few years, funding was available for a full-time programme manager who oversaw all aspects; the management was then devolved to part-time local area co-ordinators. By autumn 2013, the programme had recorded over 600 trained volunteers contributing to over 23,000 volunteer hours, 5,000 mentored people growing food and 65,000 local people supported at events.

Sowing New Seeds

The SNS programme began in 2010. Smaller in scale than MG, it aims to prevent the disappearance of exotic crops grown in the UK, ensuring their growth is sustained via seed collection and safeguarding, redistribution and the promotion of growing and seed-saving

⁵ ‘Public Health England’ (sponsored by the Department of Health) operates at the national level as a body to ‘protect and improve the nation’s health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities’. ‘Public Health’ is also now part of each Local Authority in England.

skills. It was intended that SNS would particularly engage with Black, Minority and Ethnic (BME) groups and individuals, as well as younger generations. In a similar vein to the parallel MG programme, the key mechanism for delivery has been “Seed Stewards” – individuals, allotment committee members, community group leaders, school teachers, and others who distribute and manage seeds, hand out information, disseminate skills and knowledge, share exotic crop produce, and show ways of preparing, cooking and consuming such crops. GO staff would initially engage with these stewards and provide training and guidance that would then be disseminated at the community scale by the stewards. ‘Supporting change’ was the most recent phase of the SNS programme which, as with the MG programme, was funded by the Big Lottery Local Food Fund (from February 2013 to January 2014). One of the main aims of this phase was to establish the benefits that community groups can gain from growing and preparing food from a wider range of cultures.

The analysis which follows is based on data collected from several consecutive evaluations of the MG and SNS programmes, which were commissioned by GO to investigate the social, health and environmental impacts of the programmes as well as the impacts on local food systems (Bos *et al.* 2013; Bos *et al.* 2014; Kneafsey and Bos 2014; Owen and Kneafsey 2014). The evaluations employed a mixed-methods approach featuring self-completion postal questionnaires, semi-structured householder and volunteer coordinator interviews, and focus groups with Master Gardener volunteers, Seed Stewards and participants in each of the areas. The data from all of these evaluations derive from 422 questionnaires, 66 semi-structured interviews and 16 focus groups (see Table 1). This paper draws on the combined data from the consecutive evaluations.

Table 1 here: Breakdown of the datasets from MG and SNS evaluations 2011-2014

In both evaluations, more women responded than men. The majority of respondents were either employed or retired. The household income data was similar for both sets of respondents and showed a fairly even spread across income groups (ranging from less than £14,000 per annum to £48,000 or more); in other words, no one income group dominated. In the MG project 87% of households described themselves as ‘White English’ / ‘White Other’, but in SNS, the proportion was 59% with the rest of the respondents mainly of ‘Black African’ or ‘Mixed White and Black African’ ethnicity. From discussions with the volunteer co-ordinators and project managers, it is felt that whilst the SNS focus groups were effective in encouraging people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to attend, the postal questionnaire did not capture the full range of people that engaged. This was a limitation of the research and reflects a common trend for people from ethnic minority groups to be under-represented in surveys (Tourangeau *et al.* 2014).

Motivations and Impacts of Participation

The following discussion is organised into three themes. The first describes motivations for being involved in the MG and SNS programmes and the self-reported benefits of this. The second considers the evidence for ‘quiet’ sustainability, and the implications this has for wider transformational changes in food systems. The third illustrates the ways that the two programmes are ‘reskilling’ and (re-)educating people about food growing and preparation, and how the knowledge sharing within these networks can be regarded as capacity building for food justice.

Theme 1: Motivations for engagement with MG and SNS

The interview and focus group data revealed that the volunteers (Master Gardeners and Seed Stewards) typically had a different mind-set to households and members of the public, in that they were more likely to situate their engagement with communities as part of a larger movement for environmental change. This was captured by MG focus group comments such as:

What we do as individuals isn't going to achieve huge changes, especially environmentally. Except the point that [a colleague] made, the conceptual change, that people are starting to think more about their environment. Using Master Gardener to get people to start recycling, composting, thinking more about where their food comes from and how they can support local growers and trying to locate it as part of a whole.... You do it in little ways, you know little bits. We are a small part of a big picture (Volunteer MG).

Once you join something that brings people together and has a structure to it, then you start feeling that actually all those little pieces, and us as individuals, added together do have impact...it gives you a feeling of empowerment as an individual and I think particularly for children who have so much negativity about the environment that they've inherited, you're giving them back a feeling that actually, we can actually take control in our own little ways, if they see it happening across the board then they'll feel stronger and more confident to face their futures....(Volunteer MG).

These responses resonate with the point made by Kirwan *et al.* (2013: 836), who argue that “while the Local Food programme (from which MG was incepted and funded) is undoubtedly about bringing small, often neglected pieces of land into production and increasing physical access to affordable local food, it is also very much seen as a vehicle for community cohesion, regeneration, healthy eating, educational enhancement and integrating disadvantaged groups into mainstream society and economy”.

Household respondents, however, did not tend to situate their motivations within a broader environmental or political movement. Householders often cited more *individual* motivations and impacts compared to their mentors. There was often reference to an improved sense of personal well-being, the reduced cost of food bills and the better quality of organic produce as key drivers for engagement. The following householder regards the MG programme as playing a key role in regaining some degree of personal control and an improvement in their sense of achievement and well-being:

“You feel a little bit more in charge, and I do mean a little. It’s a perceptible small amount shall we say, in charge of your own life, it’s just a little bit more under your control and a little bit less under the control of outside influences.... there’s the sense of new adventure for me, I’ve not done this before and wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been pushed, so there’s a sense of... you’re widening your own experience of life...I don’t know, I think, again, a perceptible enhancement of your own...own quality of life”
(Household Respondent, MG).

The following householder, echoed this personal sense of ‘enhancement in quality of life’.

“I think it’s raised my awareness really of the importance of trying to garden organically and raised the awareness of, and sort of increased the enjoyment of seeing something grow and you can produce something and you can eat it at the end of it and that gives you a lot of satisfaction. I think it’s the satisfaction of being able to grow something and eat it and enjoy it and know where it’s come from really” (Household Respondent, MG).

Indeed, this sense of enjoyment and satisfaction was frequently cited as one of the main benefits of being involved in MG and SNS. This enjoyment is experienced both through individual acts of growing as captured by the previous respondent, but also through *collective* acts and seeing others take satisfaction from the MG and SNS programmes respectively. The following two respondents articulate how and why enjoyment has been a central motivator, and benefit, of being engaged:

“...The people who get involved like doing it and it’s a great way to involve people who haven’t got great English. People have really enjoyed the companionship and friendliness of a bit of digging and a bit of pruning [...] and you can talk slowly and at your own pace about things” (Community grower, SNS).

“Well, apart from the fact that I’ve loved it, loved being involved in it and, and, we’ve been breaking new grounds and learning new things and, and, contributing very much to research in the area of food growing... and it’s been wonderful to see how it’s been impacting different aspects of people’s

lives. Overall, there's nothing negative at all. It's all very positive and has been very rewarding for years" (Volunteer Co-ordinator, MG).

Moreover, there was often reference to other benefits beyond personal enjoyment. In particular, the self-reported health and wellbeing benefits of community and domestic food growing – and consumption – associated with SNS and MG (that are documented in the evaluation reports) were often discussed during focus groups or interviews:

"People are eating better, fresher and I think [another participant] is right, they do start to question where the food that they buy in the supermarkets comes from. Then of course, there's the exercise. There are a couple of people that I work with that are a bit overweight and exercise out in the fresh air, try to get them to do as much as possible, and not rely on me. There's multiple benefits of it" (Volunteer MG).

This evidence of the benefits and motivations for engagement with MG and SNS supports other studies assessing the social impacts of community gardening (Cox *et al.* 2008, Sandover 2015). Another frequently cited factor was the perceived better quality of home-grown organic food, which was usually regarded as tasting 'better' than non-organic or supermarket bought products (as found in other studies e.g. Seyfang 2008, Eden *et al.* 2008). This is clearly reflected by the following respondents:

"People are more keen to grow their own vegetables because food prices are going expensive and it is also much tastier than store bought vegetables and

you can make organic if you do it on your own” (Household Respondent, MG).

“Well I hardly...I never buy food from the supermarkets these days, I mean it just tastes...now I’ve got used to eating organic vegetables, supermarket food just tastes as if it’s made of paper. That’s the main reason” (Household Respondent, MG).

“I think I’ve become much, much more aware of the taste of organic food and you...when you have something out of Sainsbury’s you just think... you know, it just, it doesn’t have substance. It’s not just taste, it’s a sense of eating something substantial. I think my taste buds have become more refined” (Household Respondent, MG).

The second theme explores the ways in which these community scale programmes can be seen to contribute to food system transformations.

Theme 2: ‘Quiet’ and unintentional change

The people engaged in the MG and SNS programmes, who are usually located in urban areas, derive multiple benefits, and develop important knowledge and skills surrounding food that are often regarded as ‘scarce’ or ‘lost’ in contemporary Western societies (Alkon *et al.* 2013). In this sense, communities engaged in MG and SNS are equipping, and ‘reconnecting’ themselves with food production and consumption practices that change

how they interact with conventional systems. This is captured by the following respondent who now feels more ‘in tune’ with the seasonal aspects and rhythms of food production:

“I buy seasonal now. Different varieties, seasonal stuff as opposed to... I always used to think that well if I fancied this then I’d go and buy it, whereas now I’m thinking, well I’ll wait and have it then and then it actually tastes a bit more special.” (Household Respondent, MG).

Similarly, the following respondent in the MG programme felt a ‘deeper commitment’ (cf Carolan 2007) to the food they had learned how to cultivate. This reiterates how the models initiated by GO have led to behavioural changes amongst people in terms of how they think about and consume food:

“But it’s your baby when you’ve grown it like that and you kind of ... and the example is radishes. We grew radishes last year in the garden and I was like, well I obviously have to try it whereas before I just would have said no, I don’t like radishes because I didn’t like them as a kid (Household Respondent, MG).”

However, while MG and SNS creates knowledge and skills that *could* lead to behavioural change and practices that ‘challenge’ the logic of ‘disconnected’, commoditised agri-food models, it is important to recognise that people’s intentions are often removed from the oppositional, political discourses associated with food justice and movement building. Rather, participants often enjoy the spaces afforded by MG and SNS as a means to share knowledge, develop friendships and foster a sense of community – without any coherent

political or activist mandate. These points are reflected in the following respondent's comments, who describes the growing spaces of SNS as a place to discuss mutual interests rather than to develop any critical agenda premised on justice:

“I think if we sat down and said, ‘everybody from different parts of the community come together; sit together and make friends’ it wouldn't work, but we've got something else to be doing and something to focus on...when people invite me to a multi-faith group or something, I don't go as it is not my thing, but I love talking to people about the things they are growing, what they are eating and things like that” (Community grower, SNS).

Although the intentions and motivations of people engaged in MG and SNS are not necessarily closely aligned to any systemic or radical agri-food change *per se*, the *potential* for a more gradual food system transformation is, we suggest, still possible. This is because of the wealth of knowledge, commitment and skills that are embedded in the networks that MG and SNS successfully propagate at the community and household scale. The potential for MG and SNS to transform foodscapes and people's interaction with food production and consumption practices is therefore latent within the volunteer and household networks. This is captured by the following MG participant:

“Having taught a community group for a number of years now, it does take an awful long time for people to start changing their mind-set so what we've been doing for the last year doesn't feel like much at all, but it is that bowling effect that it picks up speed as it goes by and it will pick up... it will start with one person and it will take a long time for it to start rolling

but when it does start rolling, it will pick up ten people at a time instead of one person at a time. It just snowballs in the end” (Volunteer MG).

Rather than pursuing overtly political aims, the intentions within MG and SNS are more aligned with developing enjoyment, community cohesion, empowerment and capacity building and less about politicising the knowledge, skills and vision of people who are passionate about food growing:

“I think it is not just about food; it is about bringing people from different backgrounds together and getting them to talk to each other, just something as simple as that. It is the idea of people that would not normally talk to each other actually engaging with each other, and as you engage, people build up confidence, so they are perhaps more likely to engage with somebody from another group or ethnicity, for example; it brings about that confidence. It is also about finding out how other people from other parts of the community go about doing things, and we can all learn from each other in different ways, and not just about growing, it can be much wider than that” (Community grower SNS).

It is for these reasons surrounding intentionality that we suggest that the MG and SNS programmes cannot be defined or understood as ‘food justice movements’ in the UK (indeed, GO does not position itself publicly in this way). However, irrespective of intentions, there are still beneficial outcomes that contribute towards food system transformations, but in a more gradual and depoliticised way. The third and final theme builds on these points by exploring in more detail how MG and SNS serve to reskill people, create networks for knowledge exchange, and can be regarded as *capacity*

building for food justice / transformations.

Theme 3: Re-skilling, knowledge sharing and empowerment

The MG and SNS schemes have contributed to people developing knowledge about the various skills needed to successfully grow food in a group or individual/domestic environment, as illustrated by these focus group comments about SNS:

“It is not just about getting groups together but also about getting more people to grow. Post war, there were a lot more people who actually grew their own veg, and we’ve lost that with the rise of the supermarkets, and I think that we need to encourage more people to grow be it exotic veg or any veg!” (Community grower, SNS).

“I’ve learnt something at every single workshop and for me, it is really important to have the written information as I just cannot hold it all in my head so whatever we choose to grow next year I’ve got all the info” (Community grower, SNS).

“What was so nice was the cooking of [exotic crops] together. Here at the city farm we all cook together because you grow a new thing like the dudhi, and you haven’t got a clue how to cook it, so you might be very proud that you’ve grown it, but then you might be tempted just to walk away from it and let it rot. But once you’ve seen how someone else can grow it, and watched them cooking it or joined them in cooking it and you’ve got a taste for it, then you know you’re more likely to grow it again.” (Community grower, SNS)

Similarly, for the MG programme, the knowledge that these types of schemes bring to the wider community is essential:

“... the availability of somebody who is knowledgeable, enthusiastic, relatively available who can talk to you in possibly non specialist language.

That is, I would say, a benefit of almost incalculable dimensions”

(Household Respondent, MG).

Through Master Gardeners and Seed Stewards, the two programmes are able to ‘tap in’ to and capitalise on lay expertise, knowledge – and commitment – with regards to organic food growing practices. The ethos of MG and SNS is premised on sharing and (re)skilling at the community scale through ‘peer to peer learning’. This provides the infrastructure – the ‘capillaries’ needed for the knowledge, skills and passion to diffuse and reach people who would otherwise be ambivalent or lack understanding about home or community growing techniques, and the benefits this can have. This is reflected in the following statements from two respondents who, through the MG programme, now have more confidence and are therefore more willing to engage and ‘reconnect’ to small-scale food production:

“I think my interest has been raised and [my Master Gardener] is really a good advocate for this because she, you know, she tells me about the benefits that she had from doing the gardening work and also working on the community allotment and she’s given me produce from there so that encourages me ... to have a go more than I would normally” (Household Respondent, MG).

“I think it’s something that has given me the confidence that when I do have the space to do more myself, I will continue. I’m a bit more... and just even things like flowers and plants in the garden that I have, I’m a bit more confident about what to do with them now whereas before I wouldn’t dare touch it but now I’m trigger happy with it” (Household Respondent, MG).

As has been highlighted, the MG and SNS structure is conducive for tapping into the existing knowledge about food growing in communities, which is not as scarce as is often suggested, particularly amongst lower-income people in urban areas (Alkon *et al.* 2013). Additionally, the network and model is fertile for creating knowledge exchange owing to the ‘peer to peer learning’ approach and emphasis on developing intra and inter-community networks.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the activities of an innovative charity, GO, from the perspective of food justice. The charity is a particularly interesting case study, because of its radical heritage and because it is the largest organic membership organisation in the UK. We have suggested that through peer-to-peer learning networks, GO is contributing to the capacity building and reconnection between people that would be required for food justice movements to develop in England. However, the data about people’s motivations shows that there is little evidence of a politicised, or critical way of framing community food production amongst the householders who take part, although the Master Gardener and Seed Steward volunteers were more likely to position their activities in the context of a need to change food systems and environmental behaviours by developing skills at the community level. Our suggestion is that, irrespective of the intentions of GO and the participants who engage in MG and SNS, these community scale

(and to some degree self-organised) initiatives constitute an unforced, yet progressive contribution to community resilience, awareness raising, re-skilling and improved community food security (all important elements of food justice), even though they may not be framed as such from the outset. For this reason, we see resonance with Smith and Jehlička's (2013) 'quiet sustainability' concept.

The MG and SNS programmes are quiet innovations functioning successfully at the household and/or community scale. These two programmes represent a form of organising that helps to reconfigure people's relationships to – and understanding of – food and food systems. Moreover, there is potential for these types of initiatives to become even more 'radical' and transformatory when approached from a food justice perspective (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011). This is because the substantial network of skilled, passionate growers connected with MG and/or SNS either directly or indirectly represents a group of people practising their right to grow, share and consume food. As we have demonstrated, inherent in these practices is the re-skilling of people, the exchange of knowledge and resources (such as seeds) within and across communities, and in the case of SNS, inclusion of otherwise marginalised groups into localised food systems that are subtly or unintentionally challenging corporatist logic and productivist food regimes. These are key tenets of food justice as articulated in the literature. However, we need to be aware that most participants of MG and SNS do not readily align with any coherent political mandate demanding change and there is a danger that if initiatives become too radical they will lose their appeal. We are mindful of Cadieux and Slocum's (2015, p. 2) warning not to "play fast and loose with what is called food justice" and not to conflate various 'alternative' or 'civic' food networks with the 'food justice' movement as expressed in different political and cultural contexts. For this reason, we are not seeking to 'label' GO as an example of a 'food justice' movement, and instead, we hope to use the case studies to stimulate

a number of critical questions that could contribute to new agendas which UK based food scholars are now developing.

First, how useful is ‘food justice’ as a framing device for mobilisation around food issues in the UK? While it may be too early to claim the emergence of a full-blown food justice ‘movement’ in the UK, the language of ‘food justice’ is increasingly being used. Yet our data suggest that amongst everyday gardeners and growers, reasons for engaging with food production are dominated by health, well-being, social, financial and environmental motives. Charities working in this area are often cautious about adopting the politicised language of ‘food justice’ in the austerity context where funding is incredibly difficult to secure. Indeed, neoliberal governance structures constrain grassroots organising by fostering competitive environments that compel civil society actors (like GO) to compete for resources, and prioritise survival over political activism (Ghose and Pettygrove 2014, p. 94)⁶. GO, for instance, stresses the proven health and well-being benefits of gardening and has been successful in securing funding from local authority health budgets. The historical and political contexts that MG and SNS have emerged from are very different to North America (where the concept of food justice has been particularly well developed), as well as other countries in Europe. This means that generalisations or comparisons have to be approached with caution. Following on from this, a deeper understanding of political culture and how this intersects with communities’ sense of empowerment and self-efficacy is, we suggest, vital to understanding whether and how a food justice ‘movement’ could take root in the UK. For example, amongst the general public, engagement with mainstream politics is low: just 1% of the population is a member of the three main political parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat). Could talk of ‘justice’ and

⁶ In addition, the Government has also been trying to introduce legislation so that voluntary organisations which receive government funding will be far more restricted in using such monies for campaigning or lobbying: <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/lobbying-act>

the ‘politics’ of food act as a disincentive to participation when people do not want to talk about politics at all, but simply want to grow vegetables, be outside, and make new social connections?

Second, if a food justice movement is to develop in the UK, what are the key justice issues that communities experience and what language is most meaningful for communicating about this? For example, advocates for food justice in the US situate issues of race at the heart of the movement; recognising and dismantling racism is regarded as a fundamental element of food system change (Agyeman and McEntee 2014, Brent *et al.* 2015). In contrast to the US literature on food justice, race has barely been examined in relation to experiences and causes of food injustice in the UK. Indeed, food issues overall have been relatively de-politicised in the UK context amongst the general population. What work needs to be done to uncover and understand what ‘food justice’ might mean to diverse communities in the UK, especially those groups that are seldom heard and rarely take part in voluntary initiatives? What power relations are at work, and how are gender, race and class implicated in the ways in which communities access food, food charities and food politics?

Third, what methods should researchers use in their engagements with communities around these questions? Experience shows that surveys are not the best way to find out about the views and experiences of seldom heard groups in society. Qualitative and participatory methodologies, based on the development of long-term and trusting relationships between researchers and communities are more likely to be effective, but they require considerable financial resources and long timeframes which charities, civic organisations and most researchers do not have access to. Additionally, we agree with Slocum and Cadieux (2015) who, amongst others, call for increased accountability in food activism, whereby scholars and

activists need to think more clearly about what it means to ‘practice’ food justice. Such activism needs to take a culturally appropriate form in the United Kingdom, sensitive to ways in which inequalities are generated, sustained, reproduced and reinforced in British society.

This paper began by posing the question as to whether charity-led interventions can contribute to capacity building for food justice. Our conclusion is that such interventions have a vital and valuable role to play in building skills and reconnecting communities with food (and reconnecting socially), and they provide a service that no other organisation is currently offering. Yet they are often unable to reach the most marginalised communities: their work is often piecemeal, depending on whether they are able to attract funding or not. Charity-led food initiatives therefore need to be designed and properly funded to target people most affected by food injustice. They also need to be funded to critically evaluate their own impacts so that they can work more effectively to mobilise the great reservoir of skills and knowledge that they have access to. Finally, it also has to be recognised that charity-led food initiatives cannot be responsible on their own for the large-scale behavioural and political changes that are required to address the UK’s food injustices. For this, a much broader approach is required, involving far more people, communities, agencies and organisations building coalitions to forge political solutions and tackle problems at local and national scales.

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