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# Achieving food equity : Access to good local food for all

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**Achieving food equity: Access to good local food for all**

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**Abstract** The increasing use of emergency food aid in UK communities has highlighted growing social inequalities, exemplified by a rise in the use of food banks, while food waste remains a persistent challenge. Meanwhile the policy debate on food security remains focused on international trade and global risks. This paper examines the rise in community-based and place-based responses to questions of food justice and security, focusing on Incredible Edible Todmorden in the UK and the network of food projects that share the 'incredible edible' ethos and approach. Drawing on the experience of Todmorden, the authors asks whether community-based food schemes should be given greater prominence in notions of resilience and 'place-keeping'.

**Keywords:** *Resilience, place-keeping, food justice, food security, food banks, Incredible Edible Todmorden, community development, social sustainability*

## FROM FOOD BANK BRITAIN TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The food bank is a phenomenon that, until the turn of the millennium, was unknown in the UK. Yet this form of short-term assistance for people who do not have the means to feed themselves has now become commonplace, with a drastic rise in the use of emergency food banks in recent years. The charities Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty have calculated that in 2013/14, more than twenty million meals were given to people suffering food poverty in Britain by the three main food aid providers: Trussell Trust, Fareshare and Food Cycle.[1] This represents an increase of 54 per cent on the previous year.

The seemingly unstoppable rise of food banks coincides with two other trends. The first is a growing concern at government level with issues of food security, driven by fluctuations in global trade and the effects, both experienced and anticipated, of climate change. The second is a burgeoning movement of community-based projects to grow and share food. Of these, one in particular has received international media attention and spawned several hundred imitators across the world. That project is Incredible Edible Todmorden.

This paper considers these three trends as linked aspects of food security and food justice. Food security has been defined by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation as: 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'.[2] The notion of food justice specifically acknowledges that people do not have fair access to safe and nutritious food and that the production, retailing and consumption of food exacerbates inequalities.[3] These inequities are experienced at global and local levels.

In the UK, food issues have traditionally played a minor role in regeneration discourse and have been viewed in terms of access to shops or healthy eating.[4] This approach has downplayed the importance of food both in terms of social justice and in terms of local economics and identity. While this view of the centrality of food to community regeneration is shifting, this is happening at a time when 'regeneration' has virtually disappeared from the

policy agenda in England (Scotland and Wales continue to have nationwide policies on regeneration).[5]

While the surge in the use of food banks in the UK has pushed food poverty up the political agenda, the cause of the increase is the subject of intense political debate. Available evidence suggests that, contrary to suggestions by some commentators that users are accessing a 'free good', use of food banks is a measure of last resort and often accompanied by social stigma. There is also a growing body of qualitative evidence to suggest that the use of food banks is frequently triggered by failings in the welfare system and the adoption of more restrictive approaches to welfare entitlements.

Lambie-Mumford observes:

> 'At a national level, food bank demand appears to be signalling the inadequacy of both social security provision and the processes through which it is delivered. Locally, there appear to be further causes for concern, with difficulties being experienced with local assistance schemes and reports that national funding for this provision will be cut from 2015.
> The relationship between welfare reform and food banks epitomises the evolving boundaries of responsibility for the prevention of poverty between state and civil society.' [6]

The rising tally of people who are accessing food aid because they are at risk of destitution or unable to feed themselves makes the global challenges of food insecurity more pressing. If food aid is becoming an everyday response to widening holes in welfare safety nets, any national or regional food crisis is likely to have extreme consequences and will severely test local resilience. These consequences will have the hardest impact on those who have least. In India, a country which continues to experience food crises despite rapid economic development, there have been calls for a 'right to food' and community-based ownership and management of food resources.[7] The Italian activists Luca Colombo and Antonio Onorati conceptualise the debate in terms of 'food sovereignty' rather than food security, arguing that there should be 'democratic participation in the control of food and the resources necessary to produce it'.[8] These arguments are likely to become more urgent in societies that have relied in

the past on a combination of economic prosperity and social welfare to ensure that nobody goes hungry.

Climate change and economic disruption have contributed to an increasing awareness of the vulnerability of food systems that operate on a global scale. The House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee heard evidence from the National Farmers' Union that extreme weather events in the UK had led to losses of £603m for British farmers in 2000–01, £66m in 2007 and £1.2 billion in 2012.[2]

The committee noted that, while Britain is 68 per cent self-sufficient in food that could be produced within the UK, this figure has been falling steadily for 20 years, especially for fruit and vegetables. Its report noted, in particular, the global dependence on soybean from South America for animal feed, and called for 'sustainable intensification' of British farming, assisted by new technologies.

The UK Government's 'Foresight report'[9] on the future of food and farming warns that pressures on the global food system will intensify in the next 40 years. A growing world population, rising to a probable nine billion by 2050, will demand an increasing quantity of food, while economic growth in rapidly developing nations will stimulate demands for greater quality and diversity of diet. 'Competition for land, water and energy will intensify, while the effects of climate change will become increasingly apparent. The need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to a changing climate will become imperative,' the report notes.[9]

As well as spelling out the future challenges of climate change, the Foresight report states that 925 million people are at risk of hunger and malnutrition, and another billion suffer 'hidden hunger' because important vitamins and minerals are missing from their diet. At the same time, around one billion people are 'substantially over-consuming', leading to health risks from obesity and heart disease. The report calls for action on four fronts:

— the production of more food, in sustainable ways that do not degrade the environment
— reduced demand for the most resource-intensive types of food
— minimising waste in the food system
— improved political and economic governance of the food system.

A brief look at the issue of food waste demonstrates the inequities and economic absurdities in the way food is produced, retailed and consumed.

A typical citizen in a developed nation will buy 800 kg of food and drink a year as well as 20 kg of new clothes and shoes, along with 120 kg of packaging. A ‘linear’ model of consumption, where raw materials are extracted, manufactured products (including food products) are created, and they are then dumped when they are no longer required or out of date, cannot meet growing levels of demand. Around 80 per cent of these materials currently end up in landfill, incinerators or wastewater. But the UK will run out of landfill space by 2018 at current rates. Landfill itself creates greenhouse gases that increase the impact of climate change.[10] Yet, as the Institution of Mechanical Engineers has found, supermarket buying practices mean that around one-third of British vegetable crops are wasted for purely cosmetic reasons.[11]

## FROM GLOBAL RESPONSES TO COMMUNITY-LED ACTION

This increasing concern with food security and food justice has prompted action at national and international level. At the same time, there has been a burgeoning of locally based initiatives. These have stemmed from a range of concerns, from climate change and sustainability to anti-poverty action or a desire to support local producers and businesses.

At the heart of many of these initiatives lies a frustration with government action, or the absence of it, and a belief that local communities have the ability to address, if not to solve, systemic issues at a local level. The entry points for such action vary, however, and the connections between issues of poverty, economic development and climate change are not always made.

Food banks are a prime example of the successes and limitations of local initiatives to address poverty through food. Focusing on the alleviation of immediate hardship, they have captured the imagination of faith-based communities, in particular, who often see it as an extension or expression of their religious beliefs. Food banks’ emphasis has been on distribution, often driven by a strong sense of social justice, but with little evidence to date of any great concern over how food is produced and sourced.

There is also a strong tradition within the UK of environmental projects, with an emphasis on biodiversity or permaculture. Many of these grew from the City Farm movement, which has been active in urban areas since the 1970s. The Permaculture Association has a network of 60 demonstration projects, known as LAND Centres (Learning and Network Demonstration) across Britain. For many of these projects, food growing is a means of countering technologically driven land use and is motivated by concerns about sustainability as much as by a desire to meet people's immediate physical needs.

A third strand of action is local economic development, with an emphasis on local sourcing (often expressed in terms of the 'food miles' travelled by a product) and the value created for local producers and enterprises. Between 2007 and 2012, for example, the Making Local Food Work initiative supported 1,600 community enterprises in the UK and assisted 7,289 food producers. The programme was supported with a £10m grant from the UK's Big Lottery Fund, and included support for retailers who stocked locally sourced produce, food cooperatives, farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture projects.[12] While the project was based in England, it attracted attention throughout the UK and internationally. The Totally Locally scheme, which began in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, focuses on supporting local retailers and has now spread to nearly 60 towns in the UK, as well as communities in Australia and New Zealand.

Joining these three strands up is often problematic, not least because of the different perspectives and concerns of participants in local projects and the practical limitations of volunteer-led projects reliant on piecemeal or short-term funding. Recent literature, however, suggests an increasing awareness of the connections between food, environmental sustainability, local economic development and food poverty. A report by Groundwork UK, an environmental charity, found that community growing schemes were bringing together a concern for sustainability, an interest in cooking and eating healthier food, and a desire to support people affected by food poverty, often through links with local food banks.[13]

## EMERGING COMMUNITY-BASED MODELS

The perceived failure of international climate change negotiations, a distrust of international institutions following the 2007/08 financial crash, and the post-crash culture of austerity and reductions in state funding have combined to shift the focus of action from the international

and national to the local. Concepts of localism and resilience are gaining ground as voters' appetite for state intervention wanes.

Both in the UK and internationally, efforts are being made to articulate how such ideas of resilience can be understood and practised in order to create more sustainable and equitable local economies. Lewis and Conaty[14] set out seven principles of resilience:

- Diversity: multiple uses of land and other resources
- Modularity: the ability for components of a local economy, such as financial systems, to operate independently
- Social capital: building trust to respond to challenges collectively rather than as individual citizens or consumers
- Innovation: learning, experimentation and locally developed rules
- Overlap: 'messy' duplication of common and private property rights to incentivise robust governance
- Tight feedback loops: effective flow of communication to show when environmental or economic thresholds are being approached
- Valuing the natural resources and 'ecosystem services' that sustain human and environmental wellbeing.

The Transition Town movement is seeking to apply some of these principles of resilience to local situations, examining how local economies can be revitalised through a series of 'local economic blueprints'. The first was published by Transition Town Totnes in southwest England in 2013, produced in partnership with the town's chamber of commerce, the town council, Totnes Development Trust and three local colleges. Similar studies have since been done for Herefordshire and for Brixton in south London.[15]

The Totnes report concluded that, by supporting local food producers and retailers, investing in renewable energy and improving homes' energy efficiency, more than £5m a year could be ploughed into the local economy. This could be achieved without closing any supermarkets or advising people to deny themselves many familiar comforts. These initiatives, the report calculated, could sustain dozens of jobs and provide new business opportunities in the town and surrounding district. More importantly, they would make Totnes

less vulnerable to change, building the networks of connections and relationships that help to make a place resilient (Figure 1).

[INSERT FIG. 1 NEAR HERE]

The Fife Diet in Scotland is another scheme that has sought to draw together issues of sustainability, local sourcing and healthy eating. Supported by the Scottish Government, it began with the idea that food eaten in Fife should be sourced in Fife: the Fife Diet's manifesto seeks to 'build a food culture in which communities can begin to take charge of creating a better food system'.[16] It sets out a 20-point agenda for sustainable food, ranging from a 'soup test' — no child should be able to leave school without knowing how to make a pot of soup — to a nationwide tax on plastic bags, with the money earmarked for community food initiatives.

Such community-based approaches to food equity are beginning to have an impact on policy. The Scottish Government's food and drink policy explicitly acknowledges the role of community and voluntary organisations and reiterates its support for community food projects.[17]

## INCREDIBLE EDIBLE TODMORDEN: CHANGING THE STORY OF A PLACE

Incredible Edible Todmorden is one of the most visible manifestations of the local food movement. It merits attention not only because of its high profile, but also because it seeks to join up the various strands of environmentalism, economic development and food justice within a particular locality, and has changed the reputation and profile of that locality in the process.

Incredible Edible Todmorden expresses and simultaneously tests the 'just do it' approach to community-based action on food issues. It reflects what de Certeau[18] describes as 'bricolage', the spontaneous and un-ordered actions of citizens to construct alternatives in response to circumstances that appear overwhelming. In de Certeau's words, 'the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them'.[18]

Incredible Edible began in a declining former mill town in the north of England as a response both to the apparently insurmountable global challenge of climate change, and to the immediate local challenges of a falling population and a depressed local economy. Its founders saw food growing as a means of communicating in simple terms the need to protect and preserve the natural environment, the risks to health and society posed by a dysfunctional food system, and the economic damage caused by globalised food production and distribution. Beginning with what the founders describe as 'propaganda planting' in public places, Incredible Edible sought to demonstrate the benefits of local growing and sourcing (Figure 2). Co-founder Pam Warhurst describes its approach as keeping three 'plates' spinning: building community, encouraging learning and supporting local businesses. The approach is deliberately small scale, but overtly public: Warhurst talks of the 'power of small actions' to influence people and institutions.[19]

[INSERT FIG. 2 NEAR HERE]

Warhurst cites the example of two local farmers, Jonathan Stansfield and Sally Jones, as evidence of the way the three strands of Incredible Edible can work together. When Todmorden High School decided to source food for its canteen as locally as possible, Stansfield and Jones were the only local farmers who chose to work with the school and supply meat for school meals. This was a business opportunity, but it created opportunities for learning as well, which became formalised when the farmers were invited to help teach on the school's BTEC syllabus in agriculture. Through this relationship, community was built: parents of schoolchildren began sourcing their meat directly from Stansfield and Jones's farm, and the farmers are swapping skills with their neighbours as well as trading with them.

Such relationships and connections can often be invisible to outsiders. Incredible Edible Todmorden has found ways of making these connections and opportunities visible, telling a clear story about the town's potential by planting in public spaces, from canal towpaths to the yard in front of the local police station.

By planting in strategic places and creating clear links between them, Incredible Edible Todmorden has turned what could be seen as random outbursts of enthusiasm into a form of organic planning. This has been formalised as a 'green route' of walkways with

edible and bee-friendly plantings. It is designed to bring a unity and identity to the town and encourages people to circulate, discovering its market, cafés and independent shops as they do so (Figure 3).

[INSERT FIG. 3 NEAR HERE]

Todmorden, at the top of the Calder Valley on the border between Yorkshire and Lancashire, has traditionally been split into three segments, divided by the Burnley, Rochdale and Halifax roads. The green route creates a pedestrian circuit from the railway station, along the canal, through the NHS health centre, which has been planted with fruit trees and an 'apothecary garden', past the theatre and back towards the market in the town centre, which is now becoming a showcase for local produce.

Warhurst says such actions are not just about growing vegetables: they are using vegetable growing to grow people, enabling them to take ownership of their environment and address the challenges of the future. In the phrase coined by Jaime Lerner, mayor of Curitiba in Brazil, this is 'urban acupuncture' – small interventions that make a big difference. Todmorden now hosts regular groups of visitors from around the world who have come to see how a town can be changed by growing and sharing food.

Clarke[20] observes that it is the practicality and accessibility of Incredible Edible that has enabled it to exert influence and change mindsets. 'What may look like an innocent raised bed is actually the representation of a radical realignment of human thinking', he comments. When people reclaim public land and use it to meet communal needs, they are exercising civic responsibility and creating 'communities of action', he states.[20]

Bichard[21] sees Incredible Edible Todmorden as an example of a phenomenon he calls the 'coming of age of the green community'. Environmental movements, he argues, are showing that they have the vision and capability to achieve change at local level without the support of national governments, and often despite government actions and attitudes.[21]

Like Pam Warhurst at Incredible Edible Todmorden, he sees the potential impacts of climate change on local communities as the spur that may galvanise them into action to protect what they value:

> '… where people are sensing an impending threat from deteriorating environmental condition, they may be looking more towards their community rather than government for comfort and security. If this indicates a growing trend, then both authorities and the wider environmental movement need to take community action more seriously as this is where the motivation to take pro-environmental action is likely to start.' (Ref. 21, p. 126)

Bichard argues that the environmental and social justice movements share a common agenda, and cites examples from around the world to demonstrate how communities are addressing the common goals of social equity and environmental preservation. Incredible Edible Todmorden recognises, however, that much more needs to be done to ensure that its work enables local people of all backgrounds to enjoy equitable access to healthy food.

Warhurst describes Incredible Edible Todmorden as a 'forever project'. Its agenda is evolving constantly, though it remains framed by the three themes of community, learning and business. While there is no 'quick fix' for food poverty, she argues that 'our work with Incredible Edible has demonstrated that there are ways of taking back control over what goes on our plates, even when that has to be done on a very low budget' (Ref 19, p. 256). Incredible Edible Todmorden's future agenda includes seeking to influence the planning system to enable polytunnels to be constructed on vacant public land and to ensure that new housing developments contain enough green space to enable occupants to grow as much of their own food as possible.

The number of groups across the UK and worldwide now describing themselves as Incredible Edible bears witness to the influence of the Todmorden project. In the UK, around 75 community groups are now members of the Incredible Edible Network, while in France a loose network links around 400 'Incroyables Comestibles' projects. There are Incredible Edible projects worldwide, from Mali to Montreal. In York and Bristol, local groups are seeking to apply the Incredible Edible approach on a city-wide scale.

## SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH FOOD: FROM PLACEMAKING TO PLACE-KEEPING

The Incredible Edible approach demonstrates how a growing number of communities are taking action at local level to address challenges of food security and economic resilience. Incredible Edible Todmorden has not solved the problem of food poverty — the town opened its first food bank in 2013 — but Warhurst sees the need to work at a more structural level to address food poverty, re-skilling local people to end the dependence on supermarket food and pre-prepared meals, creating opportunities for local businesses and building community so that neighbours and friends share food with each other. She sees these as ways of preventing food crises rather than simply alleviating them. Food banks, to her, are the 'first response, not the final response'.[22]

One version of a 'final response' to food poverty is outlined in Lewis and Conaty's[14] discussion of the international peasant movement, La Via Campesina. Emerging in the 1990s from indigenous people groups in Latin America, it has strongly opposed what it sees as the commodification of nature and international trade agreements that distort local markets. It calls for limits on farm sizes, local and democratic control of food production, and a ban on monopolies (including the patenting of seeds). Unlike movements such as Incredible Edible, which consciously avoids taking a political stance, La Via Campesina is overtly anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation (Ref. 14, pp. 230–240).

There are clear difficulties in transposing such a model into a UK context, where more than three-quarters of food sales are controlled by just four major retailers, and where self-sufficiency in food is a distant memory. Nevertheless there are parallels between the values and concerns of La Via Campesina and those of Incredible Edible, even if their methods are poles apart. Both are interested in the long-term sustainability of local food networks, equitable access (both for producers and consumers) and the empowerment of local people.

Both recognise, too, that land and food have cultural and social significance that is often overlooked in Western societies, where the stress is overwhelmingly on economic value. They tap into a renewed interest in common and mutual forms of ownership and land management, re-popularised by thinkers such as Elinor Ostrom,[23] and a re-emergence of discourse on human beings' emotional and spiritual attachments to land. Davis[24] argues, for example, that in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, 'there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor the land and its fertility into that relationship'.

This holistic and multifaceted approach to land use and management and the sustainability of local food systems has important implications for urban regeneration and place-making. If equitable access to food is an indicator of a thriving locality and a healthy local economy, it needs to become a factor in regeneration practitioners' planning and decision making.

As Lambie-Mumford's study of the New Deal for Communities programme revealed, food security and justice have not so far been salient issues in regeneration policy and practice in the UK.[4] As food poverty becomes more visible through the growing network of emergency food banks and as a result of further curbs on welfare benefits, this is likely to change.

Since the Egan Review[25] of skills for sustainable communities in 2004, there has been widespread understanding that successful place-making involves far more than simply getting the built environment right. Egan set out eight hallmarks of a sustainable community: it should be well run; well connected; well served by public and private services; environmentally sensitive; fair for everyone; thriving; well designed and built; active, inclusive and safe. Healthy local food networks have the potential to help achieve at least five of those goals.

There are signs that such thinking is beginning to penetrate the literature on regeneration, which is traditionally dominated by concerns with planning and the built environment. Woodcraft,[26] for example, describes community-owned food production as one of the 'social architectures' of social sustainability — 'the long-term success and sustainability of social life in new communities'. The Scottish Government's[27] regeneration strategy describes the community food movement as an example of 'successful locally controlled organisations that play a key role in regeneration'.

This is a far cry, however, from integrating food security and food justice into mainstream thinking about place-making. It is possible that as interest grows in the importance of 'place-keeping' as well as place-making, new connections will be made and opportunities will arise for communities themselves to influence the practice of designers and professionals.

Place-keeping is defined as 'responsive long-term management which ensures that the social, environmental and economic quality and benefits a place brings can be enjoyed by

present and future generations'.[28] Place-keeping literature emphasises the importance of green and open spaces and the value they can bring to communities: growing and sharing food in order to build community resilience and address the effects of food poverty has the potential to provide a purpose and incentive for participation that is often missing from standard approaches to greenspace management.

Incredible Edible Todmorden exemplifies how previously neglected or overlooked public places can be recreated and maintained in ways that enhance public perceptions of a town. From 'propaganda planting' in a disused doctors' surgery to the creation of a 'Pollination Street' in the town centre, Incredible Edible's incremental and participatory approach shows how place-keeping need not be the preserve of formal partnerships and official bodies. It suggests, too, that there are synergies between food security, social justice and urban regeneration that are worthy of more detailed and serious consideration by policy makers and practitioners in order to meet the challenges now facing towns and cities in the UK and beyond.

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**Figure 1:** Totnes, Devon: pioneering local resilience. Picture by the author.

**Figure 2:** ‘Propaganda planting’ outside Todmorden Community College. Picture courtesy of Incredible Edible Todmorden.

**Figure 3:** Pollination Street, the heart of Todmorden’s Green Route. Picture courtesy of Incredible Edible Todmorden.