



## **London's Urban Agriculture: Building Community through Social Innovation**

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**Abstract.** In cooperative food activities, the pervasive term ‘community’ plays a performative role in stimulating congenial activities which build enthusiasms and expand alternative food-supply chains. As exemplified by London’s food initiatives, community-building entails several forms of social innovation, e.g. enhancing socio-political capabilities, fulfilling unsatisfied needs and redefining societal problems. In particular, these initiatives recast ‘food poverty’ as a socio-cultural poverty which warrants a system change. They reframe ‘assets’ as people’s capacities, e.g. by defending amenities for lower-income people, re-commoning urban spaces, and resisting land-assetisation. Social innovation depends on novel multi-actor forms of agency in two main processes: capabilities development for a food culture, and multi-actor territorial out scaling. Together these build solidaristic interdependencies around a vision of food sovereignty for social justice. To gain more resources, they accommodate or stretch the criteria of funding bodies; they strategically engage with local authorities as partners and/or critics. London’s food initiatives face challenges in combining these diverse aims and activities.

### **Introduction**

Urban agriculture has gained greater interest for many aims, e.g. creating a more cohesive community, sharing cultivation skills, improving people’s access to healthy food, and overcoming dependence on supermarket chains. Such initiatives bring producers closer to consumers, who thereby support, appreciate and even learn cultivation methods which are more environmentally sustainable. The term ‘community’ generally denotes cooperative social relationships encompassing diverse organisational forms, e.g. a garden growing food for its users or a social enterprise providing livelihoods for staff. Indeed, ‘community’ has become a pervasive adjective – for gardens, participation, development, capacities, cohesion, empowerment, resilience, enterprise, kitchen, asset, agent, ownership, inclusion, etc.

To explore the community-building process, this article analyses cooperative forms of urban agriculture in the broad sense: food-growing, short-chain distribution and its wider support networks.

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The site is London, whose market-competitive pressures on land and people's time may constrain cooperative relationships but also provoke solidaristic responses. For cooperative forms of urban agriculture, this article addresses these questions:

- How do such initiatives mobilise and build community?
- How do they give cooperative roles and meanings to food activities?
- How do those roles involve social innovation?

To address the above questions, this article draws on several analytical perspectives, rooting social innovation in novel multi-actor forms of social agency. These perspectives will help to illuminate London's food initiatives: first through an overview of observed patterns and then via case studies at three different levels (alternative food chains in northeast London, one Community Centre's struggle against 'regeneration', and London-wide support networks). The conclusion returns to the above questions.

### **Methods:**

This article comes from a modest project for university-community knowledge exchange, within a wider programme for social innovation (see Acknowledgements section). The study investigated several London-wide support networks and specific initiatives. The author attended several of their meetings, workshops, training sessions and conference sessions.

The study carried out 12 semi-structured interviews with diverse initiatives, mainly those in Table 1. Most interviewees had management responsibilities, though some were volunteers. For interview questions, the focus shifted somewhat through the study. Initially it focused on how practitioners seek to address problems such as food poverty and social exclusion, though these were not core aims of any initiative. Later the questions were broadened towards community-building, food-growing spaces, interdependencies and short food-supply chains.

**Table 1: Novel multi-actor agency in London's urban agriculture**

	<b>Capabilities for a food culture</b>	<b>Territorial out scaling vs land constraints</b>
<b>Food growing plus....</b>		
Organic Lea	Workers' cooperative runs Hawkwood site with a training scheme and schools programme. Established CropShare for short-chain food distribution (see below).	Set up Farm Start to expand food-growing on several sites in northeast London. Persuaded Walthamstow Council to organise CultivateWF events (see below).
Growing Communities	Links several city farms, community gardens and an all-organic farmers market. Ensures that Healthy Start vouchers can be used for locally produced, healthy food. Helped to set up CropDrop (see below).	Set up the larger Dagenham Farm along with a training scheme. Runs the Better Food Traders, mentoring other communities to set up schemes for vegetable cultivation and distribution.
Granville Community Centre	Community garden facilitates skills-sharing, builds friendships and supplies some food for the Kitchen's weekly communal meals. Hosts the Otherwise Club and Youth Forum.	Spreads skills and a food culture encouraging wider food cultivation. Opposed Brent Council's Master Plan for South Kilburn, while demanding more sites for food-growing.
Living Under One Sun (LUOS)	Runs a communal allotment which grows food, shares skills, provides qualifications and integrates volunteers through therapeutically beneficial activities.	Initiated food-growing sites on Council housing estates through a consultancy contract. Facilitated a consultation process to establish community gardens on raised beds.
<b>Distribution</b>		
CropDrop	Develops social enterprise capabilities for short food-supply chains, hosted by a Farm Start site. Runs a weekly box scheme paying fair prices to London's small-scale organic farmers.	Provides a retail outlet encouraging more allotment holders and cooperative initiatives to supply products.
CropShare	Develops social enterprise capabilities for short food-supply chains. Distributes Organic Lea's produce through a box scheme and market stalls. Pays allotment growers for surplus produce.	Certifies products through the Wholesome Food Association label, which facilitates a knowledge-exchange, expanding and strengthening cultivation skills.
<b>Support</b>		
Sustain (national)	Promotes capabilities for more community gardens, especially through its Capital Growth programme. Proposes that all new housing developments must include raised beds for food growing.	Supports initiatives out scaling local food chains (e.g. CultivateWF, Urban Food Champions). Recasts 'food poverty' as a socio-cultural poverty of the food system.
CultivateWF (northeast London)	Hosts events sharing skills, recognising diverse values amongst social groups, and facilitating multi-actor cooperation for alternative food chains.	Facilitates a multi-actor partnership which can take ownership of a Food Strategy expanding production and distribution in northeast London.
CFGN (London-wide)	Brings together activists from food-growing sites, defends projects under threat from private development, and provides skills training for social enterprises producing or distributing food.	Spreads knowledge from members' experiences, e.g. of resisting eviction, opposing 'estates regeneration', gaining land tenure and expanding food cultivation.
Just Space (London-wide)	Coordinates joint interventions against the Mayor's London Plan and its land assetisation, while counter posing community development.	<i>Community-Led Plan</i> advocates long-term tenure for food-growing spaces and various support measures. Supporters promote such demands through the London Food Board.

## 1. Social innovation in ‘community’ food: analytical perspectives

This literature review surveys how food activities build community, and then how social innovation facilitates novel social agency. That is, multi-actor agency creates new capacities to transform its participants along with their context through cooperative modes (see below, Harvey, 2002). Linking these concepts, subsequent sections will show how cooperative food initiatives can and do build community through social innovation of various kinds.

### *1.1 Building community through food activities*

Local food-growing initiatives build community in many senses of the word. According to a survey of food localisation initiatives in England, participants develop three types of capacities – material, personal and cultural – together contributing to a ‘community capacity development’. Food activities can act “as a vehicle for community cohesion, healthy eating, educational enhancement and integrating disadvantaged groups into mainstream society and economy” (Kirwan et al., 2014, pp.50). In developing capacity, “the community as a social agent” emphasises place-making activities; these facilitate community awareness, engagement and ownership (Kirwan et al., 2013, pp.836). How?

In building community, the term ‘asset’ identifies resources and capacities that can be mobilised:

Empowering local people to take some kind of ownership of a project through developing their capacity and skills base is a common aim of projects, as is the utilisation of existing assets such as school grounds being used as an allotment garden, (Kirwan et al., 2014, p.37).

Asset building at a personal level (...) is evidenced in the case studies’ longer-term outcomes, principally in relation to continued community food growing, but also increased education and learning about food (Kirwan et al, 2013, p.835).

Community gardens recover and link several kinds of assets: “Strong communities are defined as those endowed with social, economic, and environmental assets, supported also by organizational structures that work towards their use over the long term in an equitable manner” (Firth et al., 2011, p.557). Such gardens become places where people revitalize their neighbourhood, engage in democratic processes to address social issues, fight to maintain their access to their garden and/or engage in social learning. Urban agriculture can link problems and solutions well beyond food growing: “Through building a community, a shared vision is created, leaders emerge, and complex problems like social exclusion, poverty, hunger, and malnutrition seem to connect in new ways.” People newly come together to think and act on solutions (Anderson, 2014).

Voluntary labour plays several roles in integrating and mobilising people:

Many of the projects are intent on generating volunteer opportunities for people to gain experience and develop self-esteem (as beneficiaries), which is clearly a positive output. But at the same time, projects are often highly dependent on the use of volunteers to allow them to function at all (Kirwan et al., 2014, p.37).

Yet volunteer labour entails many difficulties. Low-income people most want wage-paying jobs, not simply training (Dowler et al., 2007). Food projects face inherent limitations: “while local level food initiatives can address some problems faced by poorer communities and households, they are inadequate in practice to solve major inequalities because the problems are too great for piecemeal activity to cope or scale up” (Dowler and O’Connor, 2011, p.49).

Food poverty has become an important context, especially since the UK's 2010 ConDem Coalition government imposed severe austerity measures. The 'food poverty' agenda has a prevalent focus on financial affordability and physical access. This ignores cultural needs and the necessary "social agency which comes with employment and community security", giving people self-confidence to make healthy dietary choices (MacMillan and Dowler, 2012, p.197).

Towards building social agency, many food initiatives "can offer longer-term gain in confidence and scaling up of skills among householders who have been casualties of a capitalist system which educates poorer people inadequately". With a greater political ambition, many food initiatives attempt to challenge the corporate food system, e.g. by reconnecting producers and processors with consumers, and by re-engaging people as empowered citizens (Caraher and Dowler, 2014).

As an ambiguous term, 'community' has many forms, variously resisting or complementing the prevalent agenda for urban development. Local government has accommodated allotments and community gardens "as forms of leisure gardening" for affluent residents, but rarely aiming to build social cohesion or to grow food for local nutritional needs (Tornaghi, 2016). With the latter aims, New York City activists promoted community gardens as a solidarity tool, but their use values "were difficult to justify within a market economy espoused by an entrepreneurial government". The municipality equated economic value with the public good, as a basis to displace community gardens for lucrative land uses (Schmelzkopf, 2002). Indeed, land assetisation undermines community assets.

When based on solidarity, urban agriculture has "emerging forms of re-commoning urban land within alternative approaches to leisure and health", which has a potential "to subvert current forms of urbanization". In some cases of urban agriculture, inhabitants "produce space in common" (Tornaghi, 2014, p.553, 558; citing Purcell and Brown, 2005). In such ways, food activities go beyond individual to community capacities, creating new forms of community (MacMillan and Dowler, 2012, p.197). These activities involve social innovation of many kinds, as described next; the term will serve as shorthand for actors, organisations and activities creating social innovation.

### *1.2 Social innovation as novel social agency*

Social innovation has three key dimensions: (i) "satisfaction of human needs that are not currently satisfied", focusing on content or products; (ii) the dynamic process of social relations, aiming to increase the levels of participation, especially amongst those who had previously been excluded; and (iii) empowering those involved by increasing their "socio-political capability and access to resources" (Moulaert et al., 2005, p.1976).

From another perspective, social innovation has three overlapping forms: (i) new forms of public action implying public-private partnerships, (ii) social enterprises and (iii) multi-actor innovations to solve a socio-economic problem or to address a common aspiration (Richez-Battesti et al., 2012). Such cooperation depends on novel forms of organisation and inter-linkages.

Beyond helping other people, social innovation may fulfil an intrinsic need for egalitarian forms of cooperation. For example, ecovillages are designed as a "sociocracy" for democratic decision-making (Kunze and Avelino, 2015). Social innovation can build a "culture of cooperation, emotional openness and trust" (Transit, 2016, p.63). Such cooperation depends on dialogic conversation and empathy, especially 'the sentiment of curiosity about who other people are...' (Sennett, 2012, p.41).

Through social innovation, place-making facilitates community commitments and cross-sectoral activity. Multi-actor networks develop a territorial approach, whereby social innovation creates networks of co-operation between community agents (Moulaert et al., 2005). Networking events help to build a collective identity; participants feel they belong to a global community which can bring beneficial change (Transit, 2016).

The concept ‘asset building’ helps to strengthen community as a societal agent able to stimulate change. By “building the asset base and capacity of those involved”, social innovation can facilitate cross-sectoral activity beyond the silo mentality associated with top-down governmental programmes (Adams and Hess, 2008, p.3). In the US ‘asset-based community development’ has linked non-monetary forms of wealth, e.g. neighbourliness, subsistence skills, traditional arts and crafts, local stories and lore, natural landscapes, and more (Miller, 2005). Liabilities or difficulties are recast as collective resources, e.g. old buildings “as resources, assets and opportunities for social innovation...” (Murray et al., 2010). For community food activities, “greater cooperation across organisations has in some cases enabled the formalisation of a distinctive asset base at the community level” (Kirwan et al., 2014, p.38).

Social innovation can change how public interventions address issues, especially social inclusion through social justice rather than individual adaptation to dominant structures. Social innovations are “new forms of civic involvement, participation and democratisation. . . contributing to an empowerment of disadvantaged groups and leading to better citizen involvement which may, in turn, lead to a satisfaction of hitherto unsatisfied human needs” (Neumeier, 2012, p.53). For such interventions, social innovation has four major types of strategies: leadership development, organizational development, community organizing, and collaborative relationships among organizations. These are strategically designed “to increase the level of social agency within a community – be it individual, organizational, or supporting the network between these two” (Chaskin, 2001).

Indeed, social innovation both depends on and generates novel forms of social agency. While everyday routine activity depends on a familiar social agency, a better future depends on novel forms. In that dynamic sense, agency “reproduces the field of possible social configurations which constrain and enable its own future projects of self-transformation... agency denotes the capacity of persons to transform existing states of affairs”, thus gaining the capacity to transform itself reflexively (Harvey, 2002, p.172-73). Such agency builds “the self-as-process through continuous acts of cooperation and self-cultivation...” (ibid., p.186). Social agency is “reproductive or transformative of the very conditions of praxis, so that these conditions are activity-dependent...” (Bhaskar, 1994, p.92–93).

## **2. London’s food initiatives as community-building: overview**

Within their various social innovations, London’s food initiatives generate novel multi-actor types of social agency. The literature survey below emphasises two aspects – capabilities development for a food culture, and territorial out scaling, i.e. replication (rather than upscaling). Table 1 compares these dual aspects across initiatives – some in this section, and some across the three case studies that follow.

### *2.1 Capabilities development for a food culture*

In London’s food initiatives, community-building connects more people by developing capabilities, both individual and collective. Part-time paid staff play a crucial role in mobilising

volunteer labour and making newcomers feel welcome. Volunteers are valued as assets who can contribute to group capabilities and to their own development.

Some community gardens make special efforts to involve learning-disabled, low-income people and migrants. As a practitioner commented, "Projects like these bring different people together; everyone gets to know each other." Gardens face a challenge of cooperation among volunteers across different backgrounds, e.g. class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, etc. Skills-sharing activities bring together people of diverse backgrounds and knowledges in a convivial, pleasurable way, thus building personal commitments to a community (based on interviews, e.g. CFGN, 07.07.2016). As a volunteer said, "As soon as I come through the gate, I feel better: the place is alive!" (Group interview with volunteers, LUOS, 01.12.2016).

Cultivation is generally called 'gardening', which expresses the skills and enjoyment in applying simple tools to soil and plants, as well as sharing such skills. Some initiatives are called city farms, denoting mixed farming (crops and animals) with resource synergies, thus countering the industrial stereotype of farming. Beyond food production, participants contribute many specialist skills (e.g. fund-raising, grant-bidding, book-keeping, carpentry, fence-building, etc.).

In building a food culture, agricultural and culinary skills come especially from the elderly, from rural areas or from overseas migrants. These skills are shared with others, especially younger people new to cultivation. They informally "learn by doing" and formally learn in workshops. As a route beyond voluntary labour, many initiatives offer training schemes, some with formal qualifications, which can help trainees to find paid employment.

Food cooking and communal meals help to spread skills in growing, recognising and obtaining healthy food. Cultivation and cooking activities help such people to socialise, to gain skills and to build self-confidence, e.g. to present themselves well in job interviews. Many volunteers build self-confidence, go on to grow food outside the scheme and gain more skills. "For the adults and children, these experiences can help to overcome food poverty" (interview, Growing Communities, 16.07.2016).

To expand such opportunities, Sustain's Capital Growth programme has helped to build a network of community gardens – numbering 2400 by the year 2016. Since then its London Grows initiative has been "giving more people the skills to grow their own", while also bringing wildlife to the city. The programme also seeks to persuade local Councils that all new housing developments must include raised beds for food growing.

Those efforts at social inclusion contrast with the 'food poverty' agenda, whose prevalent remedies are special outlets such as food banks offering free food and social supermarkets offering large discounts. The latter often include a community hub and café; social and training activities help vulnerable people to gain paid work (GLA, 2015). Their limitations have been widely criticised: food banks relegate people to charity recipients and thus perpetuate indignity; 'food poverty' is a misnomer for financial and therefore food insecurity (Sustain, 2015).

As the fundamental problem, food has been degraded into an unhealthy fuel. Although cheap for consumers, it is burdensome on natural resources, costly for the environment, harmful to labour conditions and dependent on EU subsidies (Sustain, 2015). Yet higher-quality, sustainably produced food remains largely an expensive niche market. This must be made available by several means, e.g. secure incomes, a Living Wage and short food-supply systems (Sustain, 2015). "Low-income people cannot buy their way out of a low-quality food system" (interview, Sustain, 07.06.2016).

Hence such critics promote a food culture to challenge a systemic food poverty. London's food initiatives seek to be economically viable, especially in providing a reliable income for core

staff (mostly part-time), who in turn inspire many volunteers to contribute time for enjoyable activities. Such initiatives are seen as an ‘ecological business’, i.e. using a business model to promote ecological goals. They combine aspects of third-sector organisations, NGOs and social movements.

## *2.2 Territorial multi-actor out scaling versus land constraints*

Some London initiatives and networks promote wider food-growing beyond their own sites. They spread knowledge of environmentally sustainable methods, alongside skills for linking these with the entire food chain. Participants foresee larger-scale organisations as problematic, so expansion is done through multi-actor replication for modest out scaling (by contrast with upscaling, i.e. larger units).

For such out scaling, these initiatives monitor and use many grant opportunities, e.g. for promoting social inclusion (e.g. for disabled or mentally ill people), training people in skills, etc. With contracts from local Councils, food activists have stimulated several neighbourhood gardens for growing food. Often these initiatives depend on generic skills beyond food-growing, e.g. group facilitation, accountancy, wood-working, etc. Proposals must carefully target the priorities of funders: “They may be more interested in the fact that you are providing training, education, creating jobs, improving health outcomes or supplying local markets, than they are about the fact that you grow great food” (Shared Assets, quoted in CFGN, 2017b, p.22). Proposals accommodate or stretch the formal criteria of funders in attempting to spread skills and knowledge for building a food culture.

Low-income housing estates have been setting up their own community gardens, which become hubs for conversations and skills-sharing (GLA, 2016). These build community capabilities and enthusiasms. The manager of Haringey Council’s housing estates, Homes for Haringey, contracted Living Under One Sun (LUOS) to set up several community gardens in 2016-2017. LUOS consulted tenants on what kind of garden they wanted, what to grow, how to manage it, etc. These discussions helped to create a collective self-management of new gardens (interview, LUOS, 01.12.2016). Some were built on raised beds, partly to accommodate wheelchair-bound gardeners, though also anticipating potential expulsion through ‘estates regeneration’.

London initiatives have provided fresh produce, created their own outlets and given food meanings to specific sites. Growing Communities is a Hackney-based not-for-profit project running several initiatives. A fruit and veg box scheme brings control back to local communities and pays fair prices to local, small-scale organic farmers. The UK’s only all-organic farmers’ market hosts about 25 small farmers and food producers every week. They grow salad locally on their Soil Association-certified Hackney Patchwork Farm (a group of 12 small sites across Hackney) and at the larger Dagenham Farm.

Alongside food-growing activities, they train new growers and help people learn where their food comes from. Growing Communities has also done mentoring elsewhere through the Better Food Traders, helping to set up numerous local schemes for vegetable distribution. These include Crop Drop, a weekly box scheme consolidating and mixing fresh products from many sources, each retaining its place-based name.

An extra opportunity came from the government’s Healthy Start programme, which gives parents food vouchers that are valid in supermarket chains. Growing Communities initially persuaded Greenwich and Hackney Councils to extend the scheme to small outlets selling locally

produced, healthy food. Growing Communities collects and consolidates the vouchers from small outlets; this arrangement gained support from more borough Councils (GLA, 2015, p.8-9).

With a 2016-19 grant from the Big Lottery, Growing Communities started Grown in Dagenham, a large farm which trains unemployed single parents so that they can more easily find skilled jobs. Training encompasses the entire food chain from growing to marketing. The farm involves residents, teachers and schoolchildren in learning how to grow food. Teachers have been integrating food activities into the school curriculum, e.g. science, maths, personal development, etc. Together these farm-school linkages help to address food poverty and build capacities for food growing (interview, Growing Communities, 16.07.2016).



Figure 1: CFGN logo

For several years, the Community Food Growers Network (CFGN; Figure 1) has linked numerous food-growing sites in the London area. It defends CFGN-member projects under threat from private development and seeks to gain long-term tenure for them. In 2017, the CFGN received a grant from the charity 'Power to Change' for several purposes, especially peer-to-peer learning, and for a 'community of practice' programme linking several 'network facilitators'. This effort expands and links all stages of the food supply chain: "We are looking for someone passionate about social enterprise and urban food growing to support the Network in developing the skills and capacity of our members to be more sustainable, resilient and entrepreneurial." This aims to ensure "that the people most affected and most marginalised by the current food system are at the heart of shaping and changing it" (CFGN, 2017a, p.4).

As a pervasive threat, however, 'estates regeneration' has become a euphemism for social cleansing of low-cost housing and tenants. London's Borough Councils have been demolishing low-rent housing in favour of costly houses for gentrification or worse, maximizing the financial value of land and property (ASH, 2016, 2017). "In the face of immeasurable wealth and political capital, people are fighting back" (Dada and Ferjani, 2016).

Drawing on practitioners' experiences, food activists wrote a guide on engaging with Local Authorities to obtain and defend land access. Their counter-strategy reframes assets as long-term community benefits:

"Projects that seek to work on Council land can transform an undermanaged facility into a productive asset... You will probably be competing against housing developments, but you can argue that you're providing long term social and economic benefit over short-term capital receipts" (Shared Assets, quoted in CFGN, 2017b, p.13).

This advice draws on food initiatives' experience of proposing solutions to societal problems, as extra arguments for Council support.

In those ways, London-wide networks have developed territorial strategies. These link several elements: expanding skills for empowerment and social inclusion (beyond a leisure activity), valorising all potential resources as community assets (beyond its financial meaning), promoting a food culture to address a systemic 'food poverty' (beyond a deprived sub-population), establishing place-based identities for food (beyond organic certification), and creating short food-supply chains through social enterprises. Together these build community through interdependencies among organisations, towards a novel broader social agency transforming the participants themselves.

As outlined above (and in Table 1), each initiative illustrates transversal aspects of social innovation, namely: multi-actor territorial action which builds collective capabilities, fulfils human needs for cooperation, expands common resources, enhances community assets and redefines societal problems vis a vis dominant agendas. Next these aspects will be identified in three cases, each at a different level: alternative food chains in northeast London; a community centre on the front-line of estates regeneration; and a London-wide alliance promoting an alternative development model.

### **3. From Organic Lea to Cultivate Waltham Forest**

Based in northeast London, Organic Lea has been the largest urban agriculture project in the metropolis. Its 12-acre Hawkwood Community Market Garden features a Plant Nursery for food growing and plant seedlings. It has an on-site forest garden where trees, shrubs and ground cover plants "are grown together in a low-maintenance system which imitates the natural ecosystem of a forest".

Its activities link ecology, gardening and voluntary labour. Organic Lea's production system depends on approx. 100 person-days of volunteers' contributions per week. This is inspired by the friendly ambience, helped by the co-operative's egalitarian structure, whereby every staff member is a Director. The structure is self-described as a 'sociocracy': work teams elect a central committee accountable to them (Organic Lea, 2016).

Volunteers are trained in gardening skills, including accredited Level One qualification in Practical Gardening Skills. "We are gardeners rather than farmers; cultivation is labour-intensive, using tools rather than machinery" (interview, Organic Lea, 30.06.2016). The monthly Open Day invites everyone to participate in hands-on workshops for sharing various skills; participants exchange experiences, camaraderie and food passions while learning or improving skills. As a volunteer said, "The Job Centre puts you down. Here you gain self-confidence in the rest of your life" (Media Trust film, 2016).

These activities aim to be more widely accessible, relevant and therapeutic:

For volunteers we get many referrals from the Council's Social Services. Volunteers learn cultivation skills in small teams with informal mentoring. We have no special skills to deal with people with mental problems, but we provide an enjoyable therapeutic activity which helps them. People also gain social skills, so gaining self-confidence, in turn building a sense of community (interview, Organic Lea, 30.06.2016).

Despite such inclusion, decision-making excludes volunteers, often resulting in their disappointment or resentment (interview, CFGN, 14.11.2017).

To reach more consumers and build loyalty, Organic Lea set up Cropshare, a social enterprise paying allotment growers for their surplus fruit and vegetables. It also receives

donations of commonplace fruits like apples. This surplus is combined with Organic Lea's own produce for a weekly box scheme and market stall. Prices are lower than for organic food in supermarkets. Cropshare has developed skills to build consumer support for those cultivation methods and for place-based salad brands.

For Cropshare suppliers, production methods must comply with a novel scheme which helps build an alternative supply chain: "The Wholesome Food Association local symbol scheme is a low-cost, grassroots alternative to organic certification for people in the UK who are growing or producing food for sale in their local region." This encourages agroecological methods for protecting crop health and knowledge exchange about the results: "Share what you learn... An idea expands when different growers try it out."

The Association's slogan, "Local food for local communities", gains extra social meanings through Cropshare. This has special importance for small-scale producers, who could not bear the administrative burden and fees of organic certification. According to Organic Lea, allotment gardens have traditionally provided a recreational space and an alternative to industrial capitalism. Collectively run, such gardens now offer a route to go beyond a broken, unhealthy food system (Litherland, 2017).

The conventional food market has a large socio-economic divide between feeding low-income people from surplus food and selling organic produce to affluent consumers. To overcome this divide:

Our short chains give more income to the producers and reduce the distribution cost. But we can't reduce the price much below organic food in supermarkets, which have a big economy of scale. They pay a low price to organic producers here, competing with cheaper supplies from the global South under neo-colonial exploitation. So, we need to educate consumers about the real cost of organic food, especially its production here (interview, Organic Lea, 19.02.2017).



Figure 2: Reclaiming urban space

Organic Lea's logo depicts a spade breaking up a pavement (Figure 2). In this spirit, it promotes expansion of urban food-growing for food sovereignty, towards "a more socially and environmentally just food system for all". A booklet outlines the necessary changes in policies, markets and food networks (Organic Lea, 2015). A System Change Team promotes outreach activities, the resources to grow local food and more favourable policies.

Already holding enough land, Organic Lea has not sought to enlarge its own cultivation activities. Instead its social enterprise model has been outscaled through numerous local initiatives for growing and distributing food. It supports schools, housing estates, and community organisations to develop their own food-growing spaces.

In 2013 Organic Lea launched a work scheme for young people in partnership with the Council. With the slogan “Food Works”, it promotes long-term livelihoods through “a career in horticulture, food retail or food processing”. The scheme offers a range of opportunities within “our food enterprises” including: Introductory work tasters, 10-week work experience placements, paid work placements, etc. In the “Leaf It Out” project, especially for children who had been excluded from school, they set up their own enterprise to grow salad for sale to local restaurants (Organic Lea, 2016).

Organic Lea also initiated several school gardens involving teachers, children and parents. These provide healthy food, teach appreciation through cooking skills and encourage wider food-growing, e.g. in window boxes or small plots. Through Alternative Provision outside mainstream classrooms, otherwise marginalised students develop functional skills and self-awareness: “outdoor learning and physical work engages those most challenged by mainstream education”.

Beyond its schools programme, in 2015 Organic Lea set up a Farm Start programme to expand food growing throughout northeast London. Three motivations converged: Organic Lea’s main site lacked the capacity “to create employment opportunities for all the skilled and enthusiastic growers out there”, many having been trained on the site. Neither could it produce enough food to fulfil the rising demand. And nearby Councils took up the proposal for a community market garden.

This agenda conflicts with local Councils’ financial strategies, especially in the UK austerity context since 2010.

There is a lot of unused land out there that technically belongs to the people! Much of it is being sold off for profit to keep local authorities afloat, but together we can prove that these assets are more valuable to the community if they are transformed into food growing projects rather than being sold to developers (Organic Lea, 2017).

Along those lines, Farm Start gained several plots which were seen as unsuitable for property developers. During a long delay in the land access, the programme created training plots on local allotments for new growers; extra staff costs were paid by a grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. This was an initial step for joint marketing of produce from several sources, each with its own place-identity (Ruperti, 2016). Organic Lea gained a 25-year lease on one large site, Wolves Lane, which was then turned into a hub for food enterprises including Farm Start and CropDrop (Organic Lea, 2017).

Farm Start is outlet-supported agriculture, i.e. funded by specific shops and restaurants using the produce (by analogy with community-supported agriculture). This linkage helps the programme to pay staff more than the London Living Wage, with a coordinator and trainers. Thus a multi-actor partnership has helped to establish the entire food-supply chain for locally grown food.

### Waltham Forest Council’s Urban Food Growing Festival



Figure 3: Cultivate Waltham Forest (2016)

Building on its earlier experiences, Organic Lea and Transition Leytonstone (among others) persuaded Waltham Forest Council to initiate Cultivate Waltham Forest. In 2014 it was launched with a conference about “shaping the future of food growing in the Borough” (Figure 3). Sustain’s Capital Growth programme led the initial event, shortly followed by “The Big Dig: A borough-wide day preparing to grow food together”. The Council’s 2014 Food Action Plan aimed to promote food growing, training and celebrating. Since its 2014 launch, CultivateWF has annually given away thousands of compost bags and run skills workshops, e.g. for cultivating, fermenting and cooking food.

CultivateWF was led by the Council’s Environment Unit, with strong support from a Councillor who chairs the Resource London Partnership Board, as well as the North London Waste Authority (NLWA). Their remit includes efforts to increase recycling, reduce food waste and move towards a circular economy. In response to activists’ proposals, the chair broadened the Council’s remit to increase local food production in the Borough: “Our wish is to become the food growing capital of London” (CultivateWF, 2016). When offering large land tracts to developers, the Council requires them to include raised beds for tenants to grow food (interview, CultivateWF, 25.01.2017).

The Borough’s multicultural character has been an opportunity for wider public involvement, but also as a potential source of misunderstandings. From this dual rationale, the group Common Cause held workshops to “map the values that connect and differentiate the CultivateWF events and then discuss what each event hopes to achieve and how this could be monitored”. The workshops highlighted a surprise at one allotment:

When it began, several Muslim women took up plots, wanting to show their integration into the community. We have become conscious of the importance of cultural mixture; now we advertise allotment opportunities to all religious and tenants’ groups... Allotments have a great social value in bringing together different people and micro-cultures (interview, Council officer for CultivateWF, 25.01.2017).

This bottom-up initiative was taken as exemplary for building community bonds.

After two years’ groundwork, in 2016 CultivateWF held workshops on a Local Food Partnership for shaping a Food Strategy. Workshops invited specific groups, e.g. farmers’ markets, allotments, church, homeless charities, etc. The Youth Forum featured creative arts workshops with drama, hip-hop and other activities. The Council aims for the Food Partnership to take joint ownership of a 5-year Action Plan (CultivateWF, 2016). For the 2017 event, a Cultivate Produce Show featured several competitions, especially for Urban Food Champions, run by Sustain. Entrants must demonstrate their good food policies – e.g. as sustainable, seasonal, local, community, ethical, etc. – in supporting local supply chains (CultivateWF, 2017).

CultivateWF has facilitated a multi-stakeholder network to enhance its capacity for designing and implementing a food strategy. This depends on expanding solidaristic interdependencies across the entire food-supply chain. Before it can become economically viable, the strategy remains dependent on local authority support. But this has been undermined by the UK’s national austerity agenda; many challenges remain.

#### **4. South Kilburn ‘regeneration’ contested**

London’s land assetisation pushes community initiatives to give up or build resistance. The latter response has been exemplified by Granville Community Kitchen: “a community-led initiative to develop a food hub that would enable the South Kilburn community to access healthy, affordable

and sustainable food through a variety of food-related activities.” Based in the *Granville Plus Centre*, it has run a vegetable garden where people share cultivation skills.

Its aims are popularised by the slogan, “Empowering the Community Through Food”. As the coordinator commented, “We speak with people where they are coming from... We discuss practical questions about where to shop for good low-cost, seasonal food. Many learn how to grow and cook it” (interview, 04.01.2017). Beyond its own garden, the Kitchen obtains surplus food from a redistribution charity and local supermarkets for distribution to people in household food insecurity; the Granville Centre’s group activities make these contributions different than charity.

Participants see food poverty as a pervasive cultural problem of the dominant food system, which keeps people distant from its production in several ways. For example, “Many English people see food growing as a sign of poverty, associated with war-time austerity... The allotment on the site helps people to learn where food comes from and skills to grow it” (interview, 20.01.2017). By promoting a food culture, they try to overcome the ‘poverty’ stigma of urban agriculture, while also opening up alternatives to processed food and supermarket chains.

For several years the Kitchen has publicised a “Friendly Community Meal, free & halal, everyone welcome”. This has been provided by volunteers from the Nimatullahi Sufi Order, which previously had run a van serving food in plastic boxes to homeless people on the street; the volunteers initially brought the same format to the Granville. They were asked to substitute a cafeteria-style service appropriate for a sit-down community meal, contributing to a food culture. This weekly meal plays a central role in building community:

The meals give the community a chance to come out of their isolation. It is like an evening out – the only opportunity for a single mother with children. The meals help people to have fun and enjoy the food in good company. Some diners also bring the food to ill people in their homes (interview, 20.01.2017).

On several wall posters, visitors have written comments such as “Respect and admiration: the lonely socialise and create new friendships”.

For three decades the *Granville Community Centre* had built up a strong community base through many activities, e.g. Merle’s Kitchen (café), social functions, health services, a youth service and music classes. *But the café closed down when its owner retired in 2014. Then Brent Council stopped social functions there on grounds that nearby residents had complained about noise; this was a convenient pretext for a different agenda.*

Hearing rumours about plans to demolish their building, the Centre got it registered as an ‘Asset of community value’ with Brent Council and sought advice on listing the building as a heritage site. Anyone proposing demolition thereby appeared as enemies to the local community (CFGN, 2017c). *After the Council cut funds for other activities in early 2016, many people expected the Centre to close down – or thought that it had already. In July 2016 the Centre’s users were ordered to vacate the building for its demolition under the South Kilburn Regeneration Programme. The Council claimed that it was under-utilised, as grounds to close it: “they run us down”, complained the Centre (Raffray, 2016a).*

In response to the eviction order, the Centre organised protest by several means: a petition, local press articles and attendance at the Council’s Scrutiny Committee meeting. The July 2016 petition warned: “From the loss of our community centres to the decanting of traders from their family-owned businesses, we see the case of the Granville and Carlton as part of a wider attack on our community spaces. However, resistance is mounting...”

The Centre’s coordinator had recently won the ‘BBC Cook of the Year’ award and so more readily gained publicity for the resistance campaign. Granville Community Kitchen gained active support from young activists in Take Back the City and the Decolonising Our Minds society. As

a key body in the conflict, the South Kilburn Trust (SKT) is a local charity aiming “to support long-term positive change in South Kilburn”. Having prevaricated on the Council’s regeneration scheme, SKT came under community pressure. By mid-2016 the SKT involved all groups using the buildings and pleaded their case: “we have been calling on the Estates Regeneration Advisory Panel to make sure that communities are in the driving seat of regeneration”, to ensure “community ownership of assets”.



Figure 4: November 2016 event with local author Zadie Smith. Credit: Granville Community Centre,

To build the campaign, the Granville Centre held a high-profile event emphasising the threat to local amenities as well as the Centre (Figure 4). The Kitchen’s weekly meal became a public symbol and instrument of the campaign. A young newcomer reflected on the 2016 campaign:

The community has grown around the Centre. The Friday meals have had consistent numbers in attendance, spreading by word of mouth. Through the campaign to save the Centre, it has gained a high visibility beyond Kilburn. It raises social justice issues around food. After the Council told the Centre to leave, we all took on tasks to save it and spread the word. We brought in new people attending the meal for the first time. Everyone became more politically engaged. Many attended Council meetings to support the Centre. We were under pressure of eviction, fighting for a bigger cause, and so got to know each other better (interview, 20.01.2017).

Thus the Centre became a much broader ‘we’.

After several weeks of this campaign, in November 2016 the Council gave the Centre a 5-year reprieve and undertook to involve stakeholder groups in future plans. Councillors promised that activities and services at the Centres would not be harmed by the temporary refurbishment (Raffray, 2016b). As a conciliatory statement, “The Council strongly believe in working in partnership with the community in order to make South Kilburn a better place to both live and work and create a sense of place in the long term” (Brent Council, 2016). With this temporary victory, the Centre could build more support for defending longer-term access to the building and nearby amenities. But how?

Despite the Council’s reassurances to the Centre, its refurbishment disrupted many activities there, especially the vegetable garden. For a couple decades the Centre had hosted the Otherwise Club of families home-educating their children. Now the Club restarted the gardening in plastic crates that had previously brought surplus food to the Centre.

These are ideal for keeping the plants mobile as the building works move around. The new gardening is attracting older people, some with dementia, who bring gardening skills. We got an *Evening Standard* grant to train people in growing skills (interview, 19.02.2017).

Now the Centre’s aims overtly conflicted with the Council’s Regeneration agenda and its professional experts. Without consulting the Centre, the Council appointed architects, who were suspected of promoting property developers’ agendas for lucrative buildings. To influence the

Council’s Master Plan, community capabilities became crucial. The Centre had already led a local consultation on an alternative food policy for Britain: large sheets across the wall displayed participants’ comments for visitors to see and supplement.



Figure 5: Granville Community Centre, constructing a JustPlace map of the Council’s Regeneration area (2017). Banner in the background: ‘Building community through food’. Credit: Les Levidow

Extending that exercise, the Centre carried out a consultation on the Regeneration area, whose template was a JustPlace map of “community assets for a fairer London” (Figure 5). In the first stage, participants marked memorable local sites, past or current, which were then transferred to an electronic template. “The mapping event will look at what has been lost from South Kilburn due to previous regeneration, record what exists now, and create a vision for the South Kilburn that people want to live, work, study and play in.” An electronic map identified community resources under threat by the Council’s plan.

The Centre submitted its criticisms and counter-proposals to the Council’s consultation. As a key element, the Centre adjoins the South Kilburn Open Space, which the local Youth Forum has renamed KPS Park after the Kilburn Primary School, thus giving it a specific place-identity. They proposed a vegetable garden there and cookery classes in the Granville Centre, a familiar place where they feel safe (interview, 17.03.2017).

In spring 2017 the conflict intensified. In the name of financial viability, South Kilburn Trust now advocated a new design relocating the kitchen upstairs for catering contracts with ‘high-end users’. As a key criticism, this plan would fragment the original ‘community space’ which had closely linked the food growing, cooking and serving on the ground floor. The Centre mobilised its supporters to criticise the redesign, which was eventually withdrawn. From this victory, the kitchen gained the potential to build up a social enterprise with bookings for social functions, thus restoring a large support base.

In sum, the Granville Centre has been building community assets through interdependencies between its own activities, other local groups and London-wide networks. This effort creates a stronger social agency to defend common spaces for a food culture. This also helps to counter systemic food poverty and land-assetisation.

##### **5. London-wide alliance for secure food-growing spaces**

For a long time, London food activists have gained nominal support from local government. Before its abolition in 1986 the Greater London Council had a food agenda, advised by the third-sector London Food Commission. The later Greater London Authority, first led by former Mayor Ken

Livingstone, set up a Food Board to promote healthy food. According to the subsequent Mayor's Flagship Borough programme: "Using the national School Food Plan as a foundation, our Food Flagships are encouraging the wider community to make healthy eating normal" (GLA, 2016). Although this could simply mean dietary advice for better consumer choices, the London Assembly extended the agenda to local food growing (LAPHC, 2010).

To implement its agenda, the Greater London Authority has only a small budget but significant power to influence land use. There are high stakes for unused land, which has been targeted as a financial asset for lucrative property development. Hitherto the London Plan's quotas for new housing have facilitated an unjust 'regeneration', a euphemism for social cleansing of low-rent tenants.

From this long experience, activists have alerted food initiatives: "With land being such a lucrative commodity in the city, protecting your patch will often be a battle that starts as soon as the seeds hit the soil". To defend their spaces, initiatives must build support in advance (CFGN, 2017c, p.4). For example, Kynaston Growing Communities Patchwork Farm was given a temporary lease by a business renting from the building owners. When the land was redeveloped for luxury flats, the lease proved worthless, as the gardeners realised too late (CFGN, 2017c, p.5; Dada, 2017). This loss exemplifies the wider problem of insecure 'meanwhile' leases on land awaiting development.

A new opportunity arose after the new Mayor Sadiq Khan was elected in May 2016. He inherited a *London Plan* emphasising the outer Green Belt as the main site for agriculture. For inner London, the document simply asked Borough Councils to "identify other potential spaces that could be used for commercial food production or for community gardening, including for allotments and orchards"; these uses may need "innovative approaches to the provision of spaces" (Mayor of London, 2016a, p.323). But such provision had no commitment.

The Just Space network sought to shift the power imbalance in London's planning policy. The network brought together numerous community organisations for a comprehensive multi-sectoral agenda. Their *Community-Led Plan for London* advocated "a fair, green, localised and diverse economy" encompassing housing, health, transport, land use, etc. (Just Space, 2016a).

The Community Food Growers' Network (CFGN) drafted the section on "Community Food Growing and Production", which argued that food-growing should have priority for any vacant or under-used land, especially in the Green Belt, alongside support for community enterprises for employment and training. Together these measures would deploy the capital's extensive green spaces for localised food production, "bringing numerous sustainability benefits in social, environmental and economic terms". For greater security, they advocated mini-allotments in housing estates, rent reduction for an initial period, Community Asset Transfer (a statutory instrument), and long-term guarantees under the Localism Act 2011, which includes the Community Right to Reclaim Land (Just Space, 2016b; Figure 6).



Figure 6: Just Space, *Towards a Resilient Food System for London*, 2016 (cover picture)

This ambitious agenda conflicts with local authorities' aims to increase land value, inward investment and the tax base. Council housing estates are treated as if they were derelict or disused, thus socially cleansing low-income people. Its class rationale has been satirised as follows: "Here, on these sink estates, lies the brownfield land that developers need to meet London's housing demands" (ASH, 2016).

Complementing that assetisation agenda, the Mayor's new draft Plan emphasised "partnership with local authorities and developers". Their investment is attracted by London's various assets, including cultural infrastructure. This has special importance for particular groups, e.g. "artists, night owls, theatregoers and foodies" (Mayor of London, 2016b, p.9, 27). Nothing more was said about food.

In response, civil society groups criticised the Plan on grounds that "financial concerns of the biggest developers are prioritised", except for conserving some heritage assets; food cultivation was kept marginal (CFGN, 2017a, p.3). London instead needs a plan respecting "attachment to place – whereby locals appreciate/value their homes, estates, neighbourhoods and town centres that are cared for" (Just Space, 2016c, p.11). Its response advocated place-based food-growing spaces for community amenities and capacities.

As another opportunity for intervention, the London Food Strategy comes from the London Food Board, whose membership was opened up in early 2017. Several community practitioners submitted applications, emphasising their experiential expertise in promoting food-growing activity. New members included a CFGN activist as well as a representative of Sustain. As a result, the Board advocated long-term secure tenancies for more food-growing, as a crucial basis for infrastructural investment and organisational commitments in such spaces. It has likewise advocated such policies within London's strategies for environment, health and business – more important because these have a statutory basis.

Despite the Board's new Food Strategy, the Mayor's previous policies continued. The draft London Plan made no commitment to secure food-growing spaces; it mentioned aquaponics

and vertical growing – more relevant to commercial agriculture (GLA, 2018, p.32). It was still “failing to consider food as essential to Londoners” lives, health, environment and futures”, according to an activist (personal correspondence, CFGN, 01.03.2018). In those ways, a quasi-insider role within the GLA complements public interventions by the Just Space network for out scaling a food culture against land assetisation.

## **6. Conclusions**

In London's urban agriculture, the pervasive term ‘community’ plays a performative role in stimulating cooperative activities that build community enthusiasms and alternative food-supply chains. Such initiatives feature several aspects of social innovation, as theorised in its literature, namely: Empowerment comes from learning new skills, expanding alternative food-supply chains, building support networks and intervening in policy arenas. Facilitated by leadership skills, they valorise ‘assets’ encompassing all potential resources, spaces and capacities (cf. Firth et al., 2011). Participants learn how to recognise each other's needs and aims across great differences in backgrounds (class, ethnicity, national origin, age, etc.), thus creating more empathic forms of cooperation (cf. Sennett, 2012). Such cooperative relationships fulfil “hitherto unsatisfied human needs” for paid staff, numerous volunteers and marginalised people (cf. Neumeier, 2012; Kirwan et al., 2014). This contrasts with efforts at social inclusion through dominant hierarchal structures.

Such activities link numerous micro-agencies in a territorial project, increasing their “socio-political capability and access to resources” (cf. Moulaert et al., 2005). While mainstream institutions associate ‘food poverty’ with deprived individuals, London food initiatives redefine the problem as a systemic socio-cultural poverty that warrants system change through a food culture. The collective remedy builds practical skills of growing, cooking, marketing, sharing, etc. Thus, a transformative agenda redefines socio-economic problems (cf. Richez-Battesti et al., 2012).

To gain and maintain resources for out scaling a food culture, diverse organisations develop solidaristic interdependencies around a vision of food sovereignty for social justice, as the basis for social inclusion. Practitioners have been learning how to engage with several bodies at once – charitable foundations, the voluntary sector, Transition Town groups, Borough Councils, Greater London Assembly, London Food Board, etc. Grant proposals variously accommodate or stretch the criteria of funding bodies; they address societal problems with novel solutions, i.e., various food activities for social inclusion, mental health, skills training and community cohesion. Together these engagements build solidarity bonds, support measures and short food-supply chains.

Those efforts face threats from land assetisation and social cleansing by local authorities, often in the guise of ‘estates regeneration’. The dominant agenda maximises the financial value of land, encloses common spaces and so limits or jeopardises ‘meanwhile’ food-growing spaces. To increase and secure access to land, food initiatives depend on London-wide resistance networks. They defend and advocate food-growing spaces as ‘community assets’ for long-term societal benefits, as already demonstrated by their current activities. Practitioners from middle-class backgrounds bring important capabilities, offering advantages but potentially limiting others' roles.

In sum, those patterns link aspects of social innovation: multi-actor territorial action which builds collective capabilities, fulfils human needs for cooperation, expands common resources, enhances community assets and redefines societal problems vis a vis dominant agendas. London's food initiatives face challenges in combining several means and aims, in particular:

- addressing ‘food poverty’ as a systemic problem of the food system, not simply of low-income people;
- promoting a food culture which integrates experiential learning, social inclusion, enjoyable activities attracting voluntary labour, and skills training for a route to paid careers;
- maintaining volunteers’ enthusiasm despite lacking a formal role;
- utilising capabilities, initially from by middle-class participants, while also empowering others for leadership roles;
- out scaling food initiatives by mobilising people’s passions and commitments, while providing stable livelihoods for staff across the food-supply chain;
- establishing a place-based identification with local food initiatives and solidarity interdependencies among them;
- re-commoning urban spaces through broader alliances, e.g. by defending ‘meanwhile’ cultivation plots and gaining long-term land tenure; and
- cooperating with local authorities as partners for land access and food-related services, while also opposing their land-assetisation agenda.

In jointly addressing those challenges, actors build ‘community’ as novel forms of social agency. Multi-actor territorial action links diverse organisations, e.g. social enterprises, workers’ cooperatives, NGOs, social movements, charities, etc. Each initiative facilitates or creates common spaces through place-making activities, linking food-growing with distribution and wider support networks. As dual aspects of multi-actor social agency, these activities develop capabilities for a food culture, and out scale initiatives despite or against land constraints (see again Table 1). This novel agency creates a transformative capacity, while also transforming the agents in the process (cf. Harvey, 2002).

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