Food Research Collaboration

Civil society roles in transition: towards sustainable food?

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Summary:

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are often conspicuously absent in policy discussions and strategic planning about food security and the environmental sustainability of food systems. However, findings from a recent study of UK-based CSOs indicate that these groups make a variety of important contributions towards innovation in both policy and practice.

This briefing paper draws attention to the disconnection between the narrowly constrained treatment of CSOs within policy circles, and the broad range of different ways that they actually engage with and influence policy and market conditions. Its purpose is to provoke new ways of thinking about civil society and provide CSOs with a new logic (and evidence) to underpin their efforts to leverage resources.

Key messages are as follows:

- UK-based CSOs have historically made significant contributions to the innovation trajectories of our food and agriculture systems
- In contrast to markets, which tend towards homogeneity and are fuelled by competition, characteristics of civil society that crucially underpin these contributions are *diversity* and *collaboration*
- Policy ignorance of civil society – its purposes, how it operates and its contributions to the development of agro-food systems – must be addressed, e.g. by incentivising and creating spaces for exchange of ideas and practices between CSOs, policy-makers and academics
- Established ways of engaging CSOs in the governance of agro-food systems must be re-thought and more appropriate modes and levels of intervention in and support for civil society must be sought

1. Food is fundamental

As human beings, we all need to eat. And yet it is clear that current patterns of food consumption and production are unsustainable at a global level, leaving many of us vulnerable to grave environmental and social risks [1-10]. Consequently, various people are calling for change towards sustainability, including academics, citizens, businesses, civil society groups, governments and international institutions [11-13]. Indeed, many attempts to drive change have been made by these same groups of actors over long periods of time. The Soil Association, for instance, was launched in response to concerns about modern agriculture and food in 1946. But despite these efforts, the academics and international institutions that are monitoring environmental and social indicators of sustainability report that the situation is worsening at a global level [14, 15]. Thus, the search for solutions continues, amid an ever-changing landscape of developments from the global to the local.

At the forefront of this search is a wide array of civil society organisations (CSOs) that are allied by their connections with alternative food movements and their ambitions to make mainstream food systems more environmentally sustainable. These organisations have, bit-by-bit, catalysed significant changes in peoples' attitudes towards food and farming, despite restricted support. In the 1970s their efforts led to a surge in the numbers of farmers adopting ecological approaches to food production and growth in the activities of fair-trade networks [16]. Then, in the 80s and 90s, their success in creating certification and labelling systems enabled massive growth in consumer markets

for organic and fairly-traded foods, and also prompted new forms of financial support for environmentally-friendly farming across Europe [17: 9]. Finally, in the new millennium, they formed broader alliances that brought together a wide variety of cross-cutting movements – including the older organic, biodynamic and fair-trade movements with the newer food sovereignty, agroecology, permaculture, community-led trade, local and slow food movements – under the banner of 'sustainable food'. Together they launched effective campaigns for public sector food reform, attracted more than £50 million worth of grants into the community food sector [18, 19] and articulated a common call for wide-ranging reforms to food policy, highlighting nutrition, food poverty, agriculture and conservation as priority areas [20].

Now, at a time of faltering economic recovery, when fears about food insecurity and environmental catastrophe are sustained, their activities continue to make a crucial contribution towards a more sustainable future. But in spite of all this, they are still chronically underfunded in comparison to CSOs working in other domains [21] and are often ignored by policy-makers.

2. Civil society and the food system

Empirical research has shown that a large number of CSOs in the UK are currently engaged in attempts to make food systems more sustainable, i.e. greener, fairer and healthier. In fact, it is estimated that between £300-£700 million is spent per year on activities related to sustainable food and farming by somewhere in the region of 10-25 thousand CSOs [21]. These organisations have been found to adopt a variety of different approaches to achieving change, including "activities that make an immediate difference on the ground, such as community gardening or cookery classes", as well as those that are designed to "change the rules of the game, for example through campaigns or lobbying", and activities designed to "co-ordinate and facilitate the activities of other groups" [21].

However, the resources yielded by UK-based CSOs pales by comparison with the resources of the food industry and the food and farming-related spend from Government [22:15, 23, 24]. Moreover, central government and big business dominate the political landscape of food and farming in the UK, with civil society finding little or no mention within high-profile strategies to tackle food security and sustainability [25]. In fact, where civil society is featured within policy debates it tends to be viewed as either a delivery vehicle for top-down agendas, and/or as a social conscience for the malfeasant industrial food regime. The wider influence and benefits of ethical food consumption, as well as civic involvement in food systems and related social activism – which is largely driven by CSOs – is not properly acknowledged.

But the real problem with this state of affairs is that it leaves policy-making unhelpfully ignorant of the different forms of systemic innovation through which CSOs contribute towards sustainability in new and existing food systems. Civil society has long been pioneering radically more sustainable food systems. But little is known by academics, policy-makers and the public alike about how CSOs operate and what they have learnt along the way. Thus, it is high time that evidence of their strategies and contributions to sustainability is made widely available.

3. Civil society innovation for sustainable food systems: new research

This briefing paper presents the findings of new research that was designed to uncover the different roles that CSOs play within wider transitions towards more sustainable food systems.

3.1 Methods

The study, which was carried out between 2010 and 2013, is based on a mixture of field observations, documentary analysis and in-depth interviewing in connection with 18 UK-based organisations that share the following characteristics:

(1) they are committed to achieving sustainability
(2) they spend a significant amount of their time working on food and/or farming
(3) they are based in civil society, therefore:
    a) they are governed and managed independently of the state
    b) they do not distribute rents/profits to shareholders
    c) they encompass a degree of voluntarism
    d) they exist largely to pursue notions of the public benefit

The sample enabled an exploration of the ways that they drive change individually, as well as how they work together. This was achieved by first selecting three organisations for in-depth exploration: (1) Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch, a biodynamic community-owned farm located in East Sussex; (2) the Fife Diet, a consumer food network located in Fife, Scotland; and (3) the Soil Association, a national organic certification body and campaigning charity. Subsequently, 15 further organisations were identified from within their networks, including: a biodynamic horticultural college; a professional association for biodynamic farmers; a community land trust; a local Transition Town food group; a local community food project; a neighbourhood advice centre; two national advocacy groups; an international environmental NGO; an independent co-operatively-owned grocery store; a local organic box-scheme; a membership organisation for organic gardeners; an independent think tank; an international animal welfare charity; and, an international standard-setting organisation (see appendix). Due to its relatively large size, complexity and theoretical significance, the Soil Association was explored in greater depth than the other two cases.

3.2 Sustainability Transitions theory

The interviews and other materials collected through the research were analysed and interpreted using a novel theoretical approach that will be outlined for the first time in section 3.3 below. This framework takes as its starting point the main ways that academics think about civil society with respect to an emerging field of research, known as 'Sustainability Transitions' [26, 27].

It is proposed by academics from within this field that the current crisis of unsustainability – which affects not just food systems, but practically all other components of the global economy – demands systemic innovation. This means radical, system-wide innovations coupled with deep structural changes, rather than the incremental innovations offered up by political and business leaders [28]. What this might look like in practice is "the renewal of a whole set of networked supply chains, patterns of use and consumption, infrastructures, regulations, etc., that constitute the systems which provide basic services such as energy, food, mobility or housing" [27:439].

The trouble is, developments within these systems tend to be channelled along restricted trajectories due to the inability of people who are embedded within them to conceive of radically different pathways of development [28]. In contrast, civil society is seen as an arena from which radically more sustainable systems can be dreamt up, worked out, test-run and made ready for widespread application [29, 30]. Thus, CSOs are thought to play significant roles in the reorientation of industrial regimes [31:42] and the creation of novel identities and alternative world views that complement more sustainable systems [32, 33].

One way that it has been suggested that CSOs might do this is by experimenting with alternative technologies and social systems [34]. By extracting general lessons and principles from local experiments, sharing them between projects, and developing them within global networks, it has been suggested that CSOs can also play an instrumental role in improving the performance of these alternatives [35, 36]. Under this view, the transformative potential of CSOs is bound up with their capacity to drive change from the bottom up, reconfiguring food systems as they learn from their experiences, extend their networks, and grow their markets.

In addition to this body of work that looks at bottom-up change, innovation scholars have also paid attention to the capacity of CSOs to drive change from the top down, e.g. through exerting influence over policies, institutions, business structures, social movements and so on. This work has revealed how CSOs become involved in struggles for authority with opponents from industry and government [37]. In this view, the objectives of certain CSOs are around re-framing debates so that pressure is applied to unsustainable businesses and industrial practices, and public opinion falls in favour of more sustainable alternatives [38, 39]. Part of this involves challenging unsustainable industries [40], e.g. through lobbying policymakers, staging direct actions and protests, engaging in media struggles, and mobilising resources and supporters [41, 42]. But it may also involve actively encouraging and enabling them to apply incremental reforms to their practices, for instance by enrolling companies into voluntary certification schemes [30, 43].

Through this mixture of approaches, it is argued that CSOs might be able to create the initial conditions required for the widespread destabilisation of unsustainable industrial regimes and their replacement with more sustainable alternatives [44].

3.3 The roles in transition (RIT) framework

Though the above argument raises several big questions about the nature of civil society – which is not separate from the state and market sectors, but creates many hybrid forms that serve partly private and partly public interests – it nonetheless provides a provocative way of thinking about how CSOs engage with and influence policy and market conditions. Hence, it is used in this research to create a new framework – the roles in transition (RIT) framework [45] – which describes four distinct roles that CSOs play within transitions to sustainability:

1. Grassroots innovation, i.e. experimentation with novel, more sustainable configurations of food provisioning that respond to local situations and the interests and values of the communities involved.

2. Niche development, i.e. facilitation of learning and capacity-building around grassroots innovations, thus aiding the strategic development (including up-scaling and replication) of alternative systems of food provision.

3. Norm-challenging, i.e. application of normative pressure to the public, policy-makers and food industry, which seeks to undermine existing unsustainable practices and shift favour towards alternative systems – thereby attempting to destabilise industrial food regimes.

4. Regime reform, i.e. encouragement of mainstream businesses and public bodies to adopt and embed more sustainable configurations of technologies, practices and organisational arrangements, thus leading to the reform and re-orientation of industrial food regimes.

In addition to indicating the principle roles that are ascribed to CSOs within overarching processes of transition (above), the RIT framework also indicates that there are systemic synergies between those roles. For instance, grassroots innovation can be facilitated by intermediary actors doing niche development. Likewise, norm-challenging can be strengthened by grassroots innovation – being able to point to examples of just how sustainably things can be done gives CSOs credibility when they criticise mainstream systems. Furthermore, grassroots alternatives can be the basis of reforms to mainstream systems, though often this requires modification to make them compatible. Alternatively, sustained norm-challenging of mainstream systems may open up space for deeper transformation, so that grassroots alternatives can retain their integrity as they are incorporated. In fact, in absence of sustained contestation, food policy makers and businesses might not consider that there was a need for reform.

3.4 Activities and intentions

The research described in section 3.1 above found that UK-based CSOs undertake a range of different activities associated with these four roles. For instance, activities associated with **grassroots innovations** included (1) *alternative forms of production,* such as biodynamic, organic and low-carbon agriculture and horticulture, aquaponics, growing trials for novel crops, peri-urban farming, urban market gardening, food-growing on urban micro-sites, communal growing in gardens, allotments and orchards, garden-sharing and seed swapping; (2) *alternative forms of marketing, distribution and retail*, such as co-operative retail operations and direct marketing through farm shops, box schemes and farmers' markets; and (3) *alternative forms of consumption*, such as local diet challenges, community dining events and food waste collection schemes. The organisations undertaking these activities were also often found to be pioneering alternative governance models and forms of organisation, such as community consultation, communal ownership by shares, co-operative governance and care-farming.

Activities associated with **niche development**, on the other hand, included those targeted at (1) *developing people and skills*, such as providing accredited horticultural and agricultural training programmes (including distance-learning and residential courses), un-accredited cooking and growing workshops/courses, apprenticeship schemes and volunteer and staff development programmes; (2) *developing alternative models*, such as commissioning research, collating case studies, co-ordinating trials and running breeding programmes, providing guidance and technical assistance for practitioners through helplines, online and printed resources (including toolkits and how-to guides), knowledge transfer programmes (peer-to-peer and expert-led), and formal standards and guidelines; and (3) *developing networks and infrastructures*, e.g. by establishing formal members' networks (place-based and nationwide) and online networking platforms, e-zines and network-building events, facilitating new partnerships between network members and networking local supply bases,

providing start-up funding and secure land tenure at below-market rates, supplying specialist inputs, assisting with community planning processes and supporting funding applications.

Activities associated with **norm-challenging** included those aimed at (1) *challenging citizens/consumers* through awareness-raising and mobilising peoples' support through attention-grabbing stunts, story-telling, celebrity patronage, e-zines and online petitions; influencing consumption behaviour, educating and re-skilling people through the provision of information, guidance and advice in food outlets, at public events and through public institutions; promoting alternatives to people through advertisements, events and celebrations, public demonstrations and permanent displays; and generating moralistic pressure by publicly championing and promoting 'good' businesses and practices, naming and shaming 'bad' businesses and practices, and opposing undesirable developments – often using social-media and new forms of activism; and (2) *challenging policymakers* by hosting policy development platforms, providing tools for decision-making, responding to government consultations, submitting evidence for planning procedures, publishing reports and political manifestos, giving public talks and media interviews, issuing press releases, and lobbying politicians directly.

And finally, activities associated with **regime reform** included both those directed towards (1) *reforming incumbent industries*, such as certification and labelling of products, outlets and supply chains using alternative standards and assurance schemes, as well as negotiating the inclusion of alternative assessment systems into commercial standards; and (2) *reforming incumbent institutions*, such as negotiating the inclusion of alternative criteria into procurement rules for public sector institutions and major public events, and delivering commissionable service packages (including food service, food education, business development, and so on) for local authorities so they can meet their health and wellbeing obligations.

Despite the incredible variety of activities that these groups engage in, the research showed that they share a common rhetoric about the change that they are trying to achieve, which confirms findings from a previous study [21]. In particular, these groups would like to achieve greater levels of diversity, social equity, environmental integrity and individual wellbeing within future food systems, which, they agree, should be more responsive to issues around seasonality and locality [45]. These groups also largely agree that the most important overarching drivers of change towards sustainability are external stresses and shocks to the food system, on the one hand, and government intervention, on the other. However, they identified the following types of civil society engagement – which broadly correspond with the four roles in transition – as particularly promising: (1) grassroots action and beacon projects, (2) education, training and behaviour change, (3) political activism, campaigning and coalition-building, and (4) co-ordinated action on multiple levels with multiple tactics [45].

3.5 Synergies and tensions

The research also found that the roles generate synergies – and sometimes tensions – that CSOs harness and capitalise on to drive change. In terms of how individual CSOs in the study were doing this, some were found to be more strategically specialised than others. Thus, at one extreme were those that focussed almost solely on driving change through a single role; at the other extreme were those highly ambidextrous CSOs that engaged in activities associated with all four roles. However, the majority were somewhere in between, performing two or three of the roles simultaneously, but generally focussing more heavily on one or two of them.

Consider, for instance, Tablehurst Farm, a biodynamic community-owned farm. Tablehurst Farm seeks to achieve change through grassroots innovation – i.e. experimenting with unconventional practices, such as biodynamic agriculture and horticulture, direct marketing and care farming, whilst responding to a range of local needs and accepting support from the local community in return [45]. But it also engages in certain activities associated with niche development, such as providing training and accreditation for apprentices, students and staff who will go on to farm elsewhere, and contributing towards the design and delivery of syllabuses for professional diplomas in biodynamic and community supported farming. In this case, there are clear synergies between the grassroots innovation and niche development-related activities at the organisational level. However, when it comes to norm-challenging, there are more tensions than synergies for Tablehurst Farm, whose staff believe that the values underpinning biodynamic farming are at odds with activities such as public campaigning and lobbying. Nonetheless, they value the efforts of other CSOs that play this role, as they recognise the need for structural changes in order to create conditions that are conducive to the flourishing of biodynamic and community supported farming.

Another example is the Soil Association – an international standard-setting organisation and campaigning charity that drives change through niche development and regime reform, but also uses norm-challenging to support these strategies and its extensive portfolio of related activities [45]. For instance, by campaigning to influence consumer behaviours, the Soil Association helps to grow the market for organic produce, thereby encouraging development of the organic farming niche. Moreover, by raising awareness and applying pressure to business and policymarkers, the Soil Association enables its own reform work. However, by enacting these three roles in the way that it does, the Soil Association also generates tensions for itself. This is encapsulated in the distinction between the charitable values associated with *public benefit*, which are emphasised in the Soil Association's campaigning and lobbying work, and the commercial values associated with *private benefit*, which come into play when the Soil Association drives change through niche development and regime reform (making the Soil Association a truly 'hybrid' organisation [46]). These tensions are managed by the Soil Association in two ways. First, the Soil Association has developed organisational arrangements and governance structures that create a "glass wall" between its two main component parts (i.e. the revenue-generating certification body and the charitably-funded campaigning body). Second, the Soil Association adopts more specialised roles within collaborative projects involving other organisations, allowing those others to take on the conflicting activities (usually related to campaigning). Morevoer, by using an umbrella brand the Soil Association protects its work from being discriminated against by its usual detractors.

These cases highlight how interdependent the four roles are at the organisational level. However, the effectiveness of the roles as drivers of change is also conditioned by external factors, which is made apparent by considering how individual organisations have adapted their strategies over time in response to trends and events such as food scares, changes of government, economic shocks, and environmental change. The Soil Association again provides a case in point.

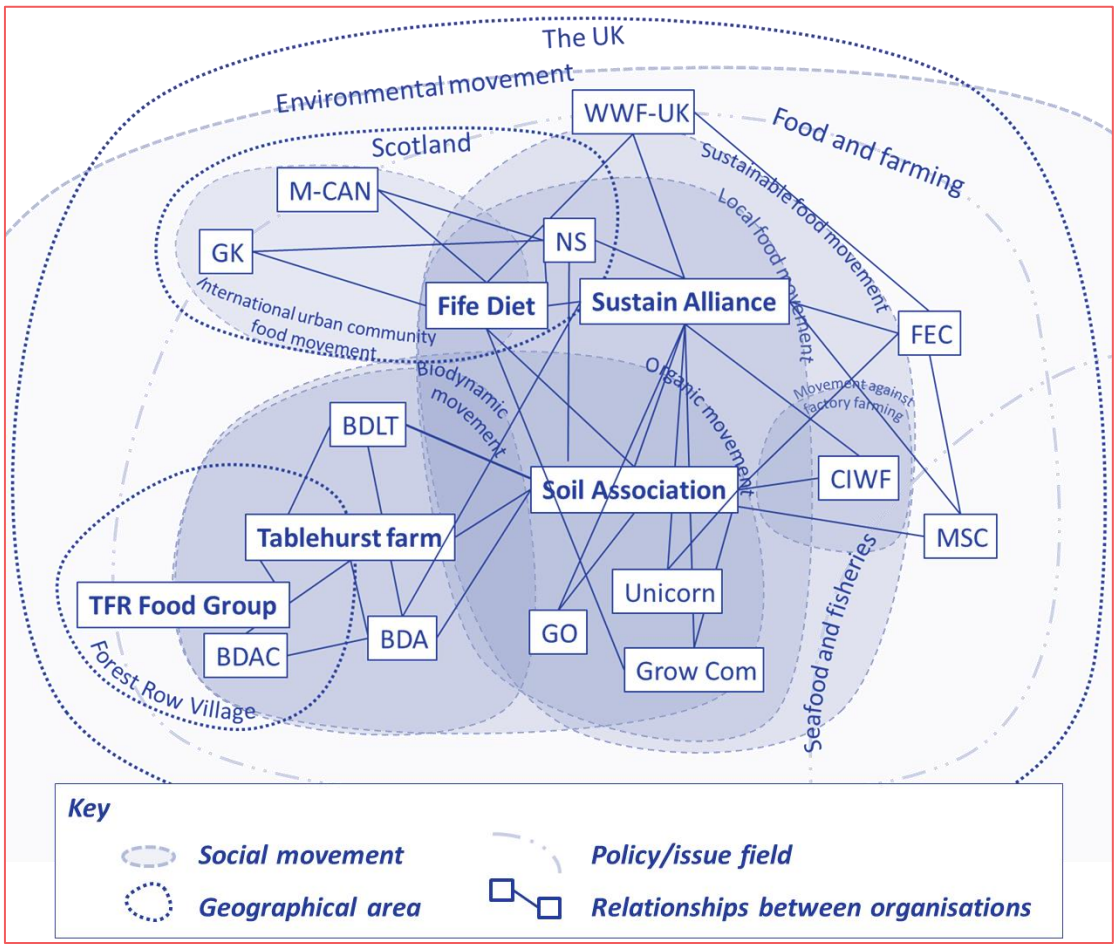
In its early days, the Soil Association played an important role in the creation of organic food systems in the UK (grassroots innovation), as a response to the rapid diffusion of intensive farming methods and decline of small-scale family farming in the post-war period. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Soil Association focussed its efforts on developing the organic standard and growing a niche market for organic food (niche development), in response to opportunities afforded by the rise of the environmental and back-to-the-land movements [43]. Subsequently, from the 1980s to 1990s, the Soil Association switched focus onto a number of disruptive campaigns that promoted organic food as a safe, healthy and ecological alternative to conventional foods (norm-challenging), in response to a series of food scares [47]. Most recently, during the 2000s, the Soil Association has developed a new strategic focus on reforming mainstream private and public sector food provision (regime reform), in response to intensifying public concern around diet-related ill-health and the responsibility of corporations and governmental bodies for nutritional standards. The Soil Association's current programmes harness all four roles by drawing together different strands of its own work and joining with other organisations in various collaborations that involve different divisions of labour.

In fact, the importance of collaboration as a way to harness the different synergies and manage tensions that arise between the roles – whether by adopting contrasting but synergistic roles within the collaboration or by clubbing together in the performance of the same roles [45] – emerged as another common theme from the research. Hence, amongst the 18 CSOs studied, a variety of different kinds of relationships were found to exist, resulting in a complex and dynamic patterning of networks (see Figure 1 below). These relationships between CSOs – which tended to coincide with mutual engagement in a policy/issue field, identification with specific social movements, and/or operating in the same places – were experienced by the individual organisations in a variety of ways (from antagonistic, to mutually supportive and/or asymmetrically beneficial). But in practice, all were found to be grounded in the exchange of resources (ranging from 'hard' technical, infrastructural and financial assets, to 'softer' organisational, discursive, and imaginary capacities).

3.6 Transformative pathways

As this study shows, UK-based CSOs are engaging in a range of activities through which they seek to achieve change towards sustainability in new and existing food systems. Moreover, it seems that they are able to exploit various synergies between these activities, which are apparent at both organisational and systemic levels. But what does this mean for individual organisations? And how can they work together in order to maximise their collective impacts on food systems?

Figure 1: **Network map showing the collective commitments of, and relationships between, the 18 organisations in the study (see appendix for organisations' names)**



Like the Soil Association, all of the other CSOs in the study have charted their own unique pathways towards organisational sustainability. However, the majority of them have their origins either in the grassroots, doing grassroots innovation, or in social movements, doing norm-challenging (or both). From this starting point some – like Tablehurst Farm – have focussed on building a coherent organisation, slowly consolidating their position before cautiously branching out into new territory. Others have moved faster, diversifying into multiple roles in a more fluid manner. The Fife Diet – which is a local community food project with a global media reach – started as an attempt to bridge between local grassroots activities and a global activist movement. It then rapidly evolved into a hybrid organisation, using all four roles simultaneously to drive change. In doing so it generated numerous synergies between its own activities and with its many collaborators [45]. This approach, however, came at the cost of internal fragmentation and a perception from some onlookers that the group had over-stretched itself during the period of its early development. More recently, the Fife Diet has undergone a significant reconfiguration in an attempt to return to its roots.

But reflecting again on the Soil Association – which spent around 60 years on its pathway from the grassroots, into movement-building mode, via more outward-facing contestation of industrial food systems, and then becoming directly involved in reforming them – it is possible to see how collective pathways have emerged from its interactions with other CSOs over time. Unlike Tablehurst Farm, which operates at the margins of mainstream food systems, the Soil Association has truly broken out of the organic niche, now working with a wide array of commercial and institutional actors and linking to a variety of other social movements. In doing so, however, the Soil Association has made room for Tablehurst Farm and the many other grassroots initiatives within this sector to emerge, connect with each other and grow – a service that it actively encourages through several niche development-oriented programmes of activity. Moreover, its history of campaigns against industrial food systems has created a legacy from which new campaigns can draw. The Fife Diet, for instance, only gained so much traction so quickly because it was able to capitalise on the momentum built up by CSOs like the Soil Association, which have blazed a trail through political debates around food for several decades.

Indeed, the Soil Association is not the only CSO to hold open a space for others. This is true of all the CSOs in the study to a greater or lesser extent. The Transition Forest Row (TFR) Food Group, for instance, is an informal, unfunded, locally-based organisation that has had a largely 'algal' existence, subsisting in a state of dormancy punctuated by temporary 'blooms' of activity in response to opportunities to engage with other CSOs, the public and/or local authorities. Each time it has been mobilised it has catalysed developments beyond its own influence, either by harnessing local innovation and ingenuity (grassroots innovation) or by demonstrating local support for a campaign (norm-challenging). The Sustain Alliance (also known as 'Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming'), on the other hand, is an umbrella organisation that operates across multiple localities and has had an important presence in the sector in recent decades, spearheading attempts to reform public sector food provision (regime reform). It has little core funding and thus it works by initiating projects and campaigns that are delivered by its member organisations, and by occasionally rallying the whole membership to take action or speak with one voice on a pressing issue (norm-challenging).

3.7 Organisational structure

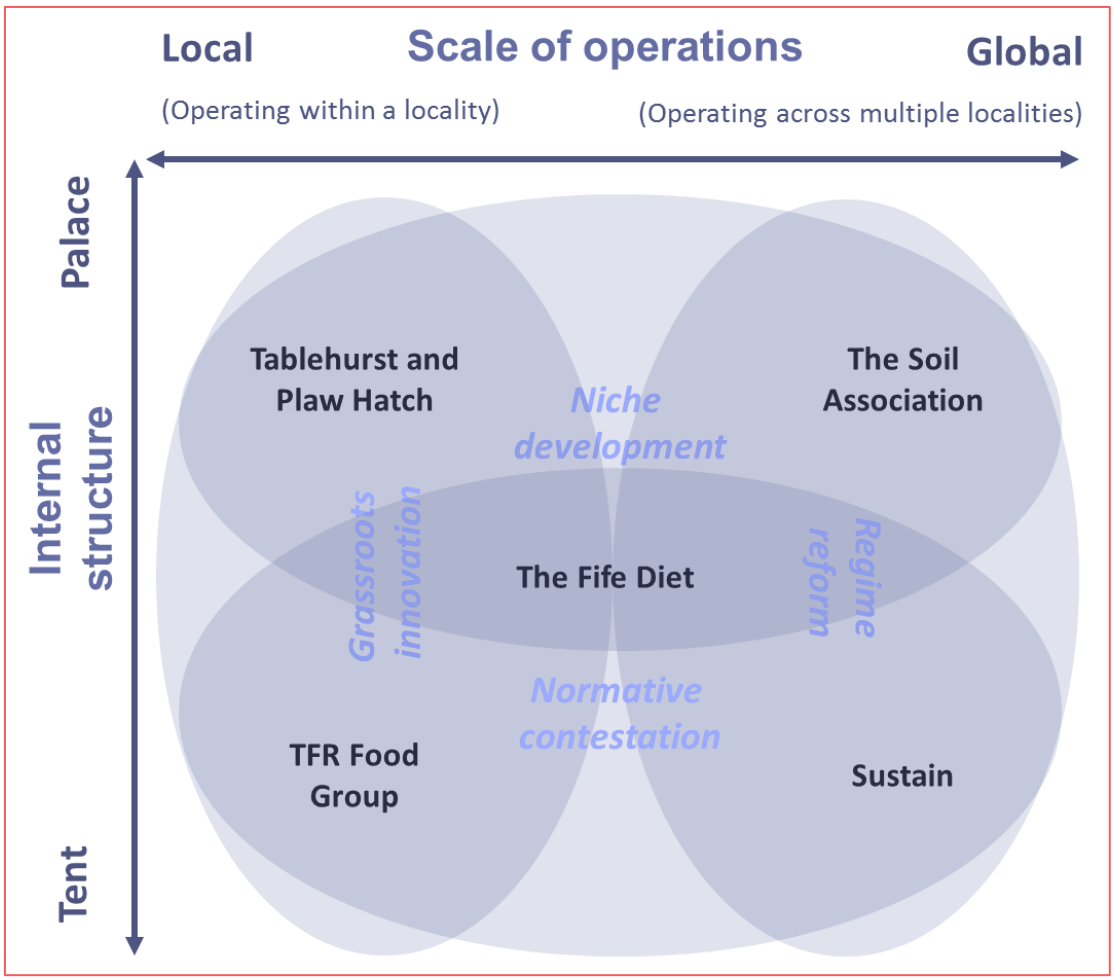
As discussed above, the capacity of CSOs to adopt different roles simultaneously has both productive consequences, in that it allows them to exploit synergies, as well as being a potential source of tensions. Moreover, the example of the Soil Association illustrates two strategies through which CSOs can manage internal tensions between the roles: (1) developing organisational arrangements that create separation between the roles, and (2) instigating collaborations with other CSOs that enable a division of labour around the roles.

In fact, the research found that all the other organisations mentioned above (Tablehurst Farm, the Fife Diet, the TFR Food Group and the Sustain Alliance) have responded to this problem of managing internal tensions in one way or another. What's more, their various different managerial responses seem to range between two ideal types – the 'palace' and the 'tent' [48]. Whereas the palace approach centres on the elaboration of internal hierarchies, the tent approach is about keeping an agile, networked structure. But are these two contrasting styles of management better suited to certain kinds of activities and therefore more effective for leveraging different roles in transition and different transformative pathways? Exploring the five cases provides some insight.

Identified as the most influential and well-connected organisations in the food and farming CSO-sector [21], the Soil Association and the Sustain Alliance have both invested considerable effort into public sector food standards in recent years. But whereas the Soil Association has gone from school to school (and hospital to hospital, and ditto other public sector organisations), co-ordinating the reform of food standards in canteens on a voluntary basis, the Sustain Alliance has put its energy into generating pressure on policymakers to change legislation that would create new mandatory standards. In order to roll out its programme of reforms, the Soil Association has made use of its 185+ members of staff, including its nationwide network of certification officers as well as its membership and campaigns team. As described above, the Soil Association's organisational arrangements reinforce the division between these two functional components of the organisation, in order to realise the synergies between them. The Sustain Alliance, on the other hand, has no such scale of operations, with less than 20 members of staff and 1/5th of the Soil Association's income. What it does have, however, is a vast network of member organisations that it can pull together to back public campaigns and lobby government. Hence, whereas the Soil Association is responsible for the ongoing running and maintenance of its certification schemes, the Sustain Alliance is free to pick up and drop campaigns in response to external opportunities. The Soil Association thus exhibits the characteristics of a palace, whilst the Sustain Alliance has the hallmarks of a tent.

Similarly, Tablehurst Farm, the TFR Food Group and the Fife Diet have each developed different managerial styles. Moreover, although they all started out by pioneering innovative systems of food provisioning on a local scale, each now performs a different suite of roles. As described above, Tablehurst Farm has followed a gradual, stepwise pathway towards increasing outward orientation and meanwhile developed a highly structured internal configuration. On the other hand, the TFR Food Group, which has no formal structure, funding or legal status, has grown and shrunk in size in response to opportunities that have largely arisen externally. And the Fife Diet, which has so far retained a relatively flat, networked organisational structure whilst working to improve organisational efficiency, has rapidly forged parallel pathways towards greater engagement with mainstream systems and closer connection to the grassroots, making it a truly hybrid example.

Figure 2: **Mapping CSOs in transition – internal structures and scale**



3.8 Summary of the evidence

- UK-based CSOs working on food and farming are chronically underfunded in comparison to CSOs working in other domains, and often ignored by policy-makers. The multiple benefits of ethical food consumption, as well as civic involvement in food systems and related social activism – which are largely driven by CSOs – are not properly acknowledged.
- Research from the field of transitions studies suggests that CSOs such as these can create the initial conditions required for a 'transition to sustainability' (i.e. the widespread destabilisation of unsustainable industrial regimes and their replacement with more sustainable alternatives).
- The RIT framework highlights four roles that CSOs often play within overarching processes of transition (i.e. grassroots innovation, niche development, norm-challenging and regime reform), and indicates systemic synergies between those roles.
- Case study research that followed 18 CSOs from 2010-2013 discovered a range of different activities associated with these roles and found that they broadly correspond with the CSOs' own views on the most promising strategies for driving change to sustainability.
- This research also showed that CSOs harness and capitalise on these roles and synergies in a range of different ways, principal amongst which are: (1) developing organisational arrangements that aid performance of the roles whilst reducing tensions between them, and (2) instigating collaborations with other CSOs that enable a division of labour with respect to the roles.
- All 18 organisations in the study were found to be interconnected within complex and dynamic networks through which they share a variety of resources. Over time, they have constructed collective pathways to sustainability through their on-going efforts, interactions and learning.
- Important contributions to collective learning and influence were made by a variety of different kinds of organisations, from the locally-situated to the global and from the hierarchically-structured (palaces) to the flat/networked (tents).

4. Implications for policy and practice

In their recent review of civil society action on food and farming in the UK, the Food Ethics Council summed up the contribution of the 322 CSOs that took part in their survey as follows:

"The focus seems to be on filling holes left in a food system dominated by the private and public sectors, ahead of working to influence and change that system" [21: 89].

However, this briefing paper has drawn attention to the ways that CSOs can and do influence changes to food systems. But what are the practical implications of this?

4.1 Harnessing the change

Though it is clear that this paper cannot provide a blueprint for achieving change, it is hoped that the case studies explored above might enrich practitioners' appreciation and understanding of the different strategies that they can, and in many cases already do, exploit, whilst raising policymakers' awareness of the different roles and diverse contributions of CSOs in creating more environmentally and socially sustainable food systems.

In addition to this, one more general point is worth considering. Recent and on-going financial pressures are increasingly constraining the availability of charitable income, whilst donors are imposing stricter conditions on grant recipients, and state funders are shifting from providing grants to offering narrowly specified contracts. In the face of this, some CSOs are concerned that increasing pressures for them to 'follow the money' could put non-revenue-generating activities at risk (i.e. 'mission drift' [49]). Thinking through the lens of the RIT framework, this could result in CSOs increasingly undertaking activities related to niche development and regime reform – such as the creation of knowledge, networks, infrastructures and regulatory systems, which are services that can potentially generate revenue – whilst de-prioritising the more experimental and controversial activities related to grassroots innovation and norm-challenging – such as trialling new techniques, responding to local problems, campaigning against incumbent practices and lobbying for policy change, which are traditionally funded through charitable donations of various sorts. However, the research presented above would not support this strategy, since the individual successes of all these different kinds of activities – in terms of achieving change – are highly interdependent. In other words, organisations enacting niche development and regime reform are most effective when the other two roles (grassroots innovation and norm-challenging) are also in operation, so it would be a false economy for CSOs to abandon (*en masse*) those other two roles and focus only on the former[i].

Since this dilemma, however, is largely being driven by external circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect CSOs to come up with all the answers. Moreover, since the food and farming CSO-sector in the UK is characterised by highly capable and inspired individuals working within a great diversity of organisations and initiatives it is hard to offer valuable 'advice' about how they 'should' be doing things. Thus, an alternative outcome of this research might be to help funders and policy-makers to provide better support for their work.

4.2 Appropriate forms of support

Making sure that food policy takes into account, and is generally aware of, the important roles that CSOs play in transitions to sustainability is in itself an important challenge that needs little justification here. Thus, attempting to communicate the results of this and similar research in ways that are relevant and convincing to policymakers is paramount.

As a start, it might be useful to ask some 'what if' style questions, which can then be debated more widely with CSOs, policy-makers and other academics.

What if food policy:

- Viewed civil society as a source, incubator, champion and translator of innovations – rather than treating CSOs as (variously) irrelevant, expedient delivery partners, or just troublesome?
- Understood civil society innovation in terms of systems dynamics, rather than focussing on individual organisations for purposes of administration, regulation and evaluation?
- Recognised the mutually reinforcing nature of the different roles that CSOs play in transitions to sustainability?
- Acknowledged the need to support a diversity of approaches?

These questions in turn open up a variety of further enquiries about what each of the conditions specified, if they were met, might look like in practice. Particular dimensions of this might concern how CSO activity is evaluated, how CSOs are regulated, how funding is administered to them, how they are engaged within policy development processes, how they are represented within policy debates, and how they could be supported in a variety of other ways. But it is also important to put

the boot on the other foot too, asking how policy can learn from CSOs and develop the kinds of relationships with them through which more progressive shifts in consumer behaviour, institutional food provision and food markets might become a more tangible reality in the UK.

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide answers to all these questions, the table below is presented as a rough guide to what appropriate forms of support for CSOs might be like, based on the findings discussed in section 3. The left hand column lists the kinds of synergistic, collaborative behaviours of CSOs that policy-makers and funders should be open to and encourage from CSOs, and the right hand column lists constraining kinds of behaviours that they should not expect or ask of CSOs.

"Appropriate forms of support for CSOs"

"…Is open to them"	"…Doesn't ask them to"
Articulating and practising a variety of different strategies for achieving change simultaneously.	Adopt overly distinct or limited approaches to achieving change, or specify too many details of their role and function in wider change processes.
Adapting their approaches over time, as they respond to internal developments and the dynamic environments in which they operate.	Commit to long-term strategic plans unless there is significant flexibility built in, in a meaningful way.
Collaborating in a variety of ways, formally and informally, with other CSOs, public institutions and businesses.	Operate independently within silos, or shut potential partners out of the process.
Experimenting with different ways of providing food without necessarily producing much volume.	Deliver significant changes to food production and consumption at scale on their own/directly.
Contributing to sustainability in food systems under different banners and guises.	Adopt top-down framings of the change that they are seeking to achieve.

5. Next steps and further research

A shortcoming of this research and indeed the briefing paper overall is that it does not adequately address the full breadth of CSOs working on food and farming in the UK. It has two particular 'blind spots'. First, the whole gamut of public health-focussed CSOs and campaigns that deal with food from a nutritional angle, and second, the international development NGOs that tackle sustainability in food and farming in different international contexts, both of which are heavily concerned with matters relating to food poverty. On the contrary, this paper has focussed more narrowly on the environmental aspects of sustainable food systems and has thus sampled CSOs that work in this area (though they too make crossovers into nutrition, economic development and food poverty). It is interesting though to reflect that this omission actually reflects historic divides between these sub-fields of food and farming, particularly between health and environment, which seem to be lessening as they are coming together in new alliances. For the environmental groups, this is stimulated by increasing recognition that environmental factors are poor motivators of behaviour change, whereas health is a much more powerful motivator. For public health groups, this is stimulated by a deepening appreciation of the powerful environmental drivers of dietary health and wellbeing. For now it will suffice to say that further research of the sort presented here should better reflect these new alignments by looking across public health and the environment, whilst exploring the differences between UK-based and international development contexts.

The research presented above was designed to uncover the processes through which CSOs seek to drive change in food systems towards sustainability. It was not designed to explain the relative successes and failures of these efforts in terms of measurable impacts or outcomes. However, if it

were deemed desirable, this could be addressed through further research, especially using an action-research approach in collaboration with CSOs. Moreover, with further testing of the framework[i], quantitative techniques could potentially be used to reveal which geographical, social, economic, cultural and other related factors are of most significance in terms of enabling and constraining the performance of the different roles and achieving desired outcomes. Such an analysis might produce powerful tools for informing policy and practice (e.g. regarding how to better target support and create favourable conditions), so long as those tools were not overly systematising, but were instead process-based, adaptable and benchmarked against CSOs' own intended roles and impacts.

Another potentially fruitful area for further exploration concerns the specific types of policies/policy changes that might create an enabling context in which CSOs could perform their innovative roles most effectively. This might entail mapping or more comprehensively reviewing the ways in which CSO activity is evaluated, how CSOs are regulated, how funding is administered to them, and so on (see previous section), as well as exploring alternative policy options through multi-criteria assessment with involvement from different stakeholders.

In general, it is clear that there is a need to better incentivise and create spaces for academics to learn about and support civil society strategies and values. Thus, a somewhat glib conclusion is that the Food Research Collaboration seems to have its work cut out for it.

Summary of unresolved issues and questions to be addressed through further research:

Unresolved issue:	Research question:
Measures of success	What (if any) measurable impacts or outcomes can be used as indicators of success and failure with respect to civil society innovation?
Policy context	How can policy create an enabling context in which CSOs can perform their innovative roles most effectively?
Health & international development	How are the new alliances between environmental, public health and development-focussed CSOs shaping collective pathways towards sustainable food systems?

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Endnotes:

i. It is possible that the RIT framework may not constitute a comprehensive model, due to its initial deductive basis. The consequence of this, therefore, is that the four roles identified in the RIT framework cannot be claimed to offer an exhaustive guide.

ii. This finding plays into broader debates around the need for CSOs to strike a balance between the pursuit of organisational sustainability on the one hand, and wider social purposes (or 'mission') on the other, which is often framed as the 'money or mission' dilemma.

Appendix:

Biodynamic Agricultural College (BDAC), Biodynamic Land Trust (BDLT), Biodynamic Agricultural Association (BDA), Transition Forest Row Food Group (TFR Food Group), Greener Kirkcaldy (GK), Moffat-CAN (M-CAN), Nourish Scotland (NS), Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming (Sustain Alliance), WWF-UK, Unicorn Grocery (Unicorn), Growing Communities (Grow Com), Garden Organic (GO), Food Ethics Council (FEC), Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

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Improving the UK food system

Food Research Collaboration

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Food Research Collaboration Briefing Papers present reviews of evidence on key food issues identified by and relevant to the FRC membership of academics and CSOs.

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