FRC Food Policy Evidence Paper

Defining Values: How Food Hubs put their principles into practice

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September 2022

Food Research Collaboration

an initiative of

Centre for Food Policy
Shaping an effective food system

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Contents

Key Messages

- Sustainable food hubs are led by their values, which influence their approaches to sustainability.
- Although they define these values differently, the way the hubs put them into practice is very similar.
- Food hubs' values change and develop in response to their communities' needs, and they make compromises to have an overall positive impact.
- Food hubs report that they feel under pressure to 'fix' some of the food system's structural problems, but (as also illustrated in the academic literature) there is a mismatch between the expectations placed on food hubs and the reality of what they can provide.
- Grant-funded food hubs have a clearer sense than revenue-funded hubs of how they implement their values and achieve impact because they are required to report their impact to funders.
- Revenue-funded hubs feel that they have more autonomy in implementing their values than grant-funded hubs.
- Food hubs' willingness to reflect on and debate their values contributes to their resilience as alternatives to the dominant food system.

Introduction: a values-led food supply

Sustainable food hubs are values-led. They define themselves by their environmental, social and economic values, in opposition to dominant food systems' negative environmental, economic and social outcomes.

This report looks at how sustainable food hubs put some of these values into practice. It is based on detailed interviews with a group of food hubs.[1] These hubs identified environmental sustainability as one of their core values. From this starting point, the report explores how environmental sustainability – and a set of social values which the hubs linked to it, such as fairness, localism and co-operativism – is defined and put into practice by food hubs.

As intermediaries who are relied upon by both producers and customers to identify and implement valuable and sustainable practices, the people who run sustainable food hubs have to make decisions every day to uphold their core values. These decisions impact both producers and eaters. As a result, hubs are continuously defining what sustainability – as a core value – actually means when it is put in practice.

Some hubs had clear and explicit values, in some cases written on a board on the wall. Others' values were less clearly defined: the emphasis for these hubs was on living their values, rather than talking about them. For one hub, prioritizing 'action over words' was a value in itself.

Putting principles into practice can be a challenge, notably when the hubs' goals conflict with each other. For example, they may simultaneously want to pay a fair wage, pay the farmer a fair price, charge affordable prices for produce, minimize the food system's environmental impact, and meet customer expectations. This study investigates how hubs fare when they must balance competing pressures.

Our research found that that **each hub has its own vision of a more sustainable food system in their local context, which inspires distinctive values and culture.** It also found that **some values-led practices are easier than others.** In response to changing circumstances or customer pressure, hubs must prioritize, and **sometimes have to compromise on their values.** This finding echoes the academic literature on food hubs and alternative food networks, which also reports that the pressure on sustainable food hubs to deliver environmental, social and economic benefit for their communities does not match the reality of what hubs can provide.

However, while economic viability, social benefit and environmental sustainability can sometimes be in conflict, the hubs also show how they can be in harmony. Ultimately, to achieve longevity by meeting the shifting needs and expectations of their community – customers, suppliers, workers and funders – **hubs need to be flexible and allow their values to develop over time.**

Sustainable food hubs

Food enterprises that source food directly from multiple producers, aggregate the produce, and sell it on to eaters, often applying a set of standards or values to their sourcing and how they operate.

Values shaped by sustainability

When asked about their guiding values, every food hub in the study mentioned sustainability. As our earlier research has shown, achieving sustainability in the local food system is a complicated issue. Nonetheless, it is an explicit principle for most of the food hubs we interviewed, even while it is understood as a complex and even contradictory concept.

For half of the food hubs, sustainability encompassed at least three dimensions: environmental, social and economic. The idea that sustainability can be divided into three 'pillars' is derived from the 1987 Brundtland report,[2] and is sometimes referred to as the 'triple-bottom-line' approach.

However, the three pillars of sustainability were given different degrees of importance by different hubs. For example, one food hub interviewee said that environmental sustainability was 'the main reason why the business does what it does' – but this meant that economic viability had been hard to achieve:

> *'We've really always had our heart on our sleeve and said, we're going to try and do things in an environmentally sustainable way... But it's been a notoriously difficult business to actually make money doing'.*

Another interviewee, from a longer established hub, prioritised economic sustainability, which this hub viewed as a crucial means to achieve success across the other categories. In this framing, economic sustainability enabled the hub to stay in business, which, in turn, allowed it to put its values

of environmental and social sustainability into action.

Younger hubs (those that had existed for less than 10 years) found the triple-bottom-line approach to sustainability hardest to achieve. As they worked on establishing their business, their environmental and economic values could come into conflict. Often, they were forced to make compromises. **The earliest years are the most precarious for sustainable food hubs.**

It's important to add that some hubs did not accept the triple-bottom-line approach, which they saw as either vague or reductive. One hub employee said:

> *'Sustainable' is a really ill-defined catch-all term ... we're using it as a label to describe a loose constellation of practices which are positive for our environment, which create an overall positive'.*

Another, more critical, suggested that it required wearing a particular 'pair of glasses' that couldn't capture the breadth of activity that their hub was working towards. Some of the interviewed hubs preferred to use 'agroecology' as a framework, arguing that it facilitates more holistic regeneration of the local area, encompasses a wider range of values than 'sustainable' food production, and encourages biodiversity as top priority.

Each hub gave careful thought to what sustainability meant for their individual project. **'Sustainability' requires hubs to be flexible and accept compromises so they can have a positive impact overall.**

Putting values into practice

Interestingly, despite these differences in interpretation, the way the hubs put their values into practice was very similar.

All the hubs interviewed had designed **buying practices to reflect their values:**

- Almost all the food hubs **traded in certified organic produce**. Purchasing produce with this certification was popular, particularly when certain hubs were buying from national or international wholesalers, because it represents a means to monitor environmental standards when it is not feasible to visit each farm that provides the hub's produce.
- All the hubs **privileged produce from local farms.** This was seen as environmentally sustainable because the produce is seasonal (therefore grown without artificial heat and light) and travels shorter distances between grower and eater.
- Furthermore, ***selling*** **seasonal produce was seen to enact sustainability values**, because it is a way to encourage customers to eat a more sustainable diet.
- All of the hubs **avoided supplying air-freighted produce**, because of the climate impacts of air miles.
- However, **customers' expectations could act as a barrier** to the hubs' efforts to support localism and seasonality. Some of the hubs felt they had to provide a comparable experience to mainstream supermarkets. This meant expanding the offer beyond local and seasonal fruit and vegetables, and possibly choosing to offer 'staple lines' such as bananas, bought from wholesalers rather than the 'farm gate':

  > *'It's a bit of balancing act constantly between wanting to have a*

comparable offer to one of the multiple supermarkets, but then also really trying to promote a seasonal approach'.

Beyond their buying policy, the hubs took a variety of approaches designed to **minimize environmental impacts**, such as using electric vehicles to deliver veg boxes or encouraging customers to travel to their market using bicycles or public transport where feasible.

Some hubs were working on **increasing the circularity of resources**. For example, some hubs had **reduced packaging**. Again, however, pressure from customers had stopped some hubs from using what they saw as the most sustainable options: one hub representative explained that customers desired cardboard packaging but the hub did not think paper products were actually more sustainable than single-use plastic. This was challenging to communicate to customers:

'There's a real disconnect between what consumers want … and what the actual reality is'.

Quantifying impacts

The hubs reported that deciding on the most sustainable practices was not always obvious or clear. For example, one hub had to choose between a local farm and a certified organic operation further afield. Which is more sustainable? To reduce transportation emissions or buy from a farm which uses fewer chemicals to grow crops? Every decision must consider the geographic location of the hub and the practices of the local farm. As a result, positive impacts were often hard to quantify.

These decisions sparked **debate within the organisations** – and the interviewees saw these debates as positive experiences. While the sustainability benefits of short food supply chains and alternative food networks have been extensively debated in academic literature,[3] **the unique location, local community and structure of each hub meant that hub employees had to make sense of sustainability science within the context and needs of their own community.**

Ultimately, the hubs' efforts to put their values into practice coalesced around matters of scale. One question came out of every interview: ***'What is a hub in a position to tackle, in terms of sustainability?'*** There were lots of different answers to this question. Overall, while keen to minimize negative impacts, as grassroots, hyper-local businesses, **the reality is that hubs cannot deliver *all* their goals for the food system:**

'Sustainability has this very, very varied meaning in different contexts. So, a challenge for us, as an organisation, is unpacking that, identifying what's relevant, and staying focused on what it is that we're actually in a position to address.'

In terms of tracking impacts, **hubs funded through grants or by external organisations had a clearer sense of their environmental and social impacts than revenue-funded hubs.** This was because they were required to report them to funders. External funding streams change and evolve over time, so hubs seeking funding may have to alter their guiding principles to access renewed funding. It was therefore suggested that **hubs funded through their own trade have more autonomy to define their values.**

Social values: supporting local farmers and cultural tradition

For the hubs, local landscape, cultural history and food distribution were inherently connected, and this connection shaped their values.

All the participating hubs **supported local growers and food producers, and many were engaged with land management and biodiversity initiatives in their local area.** This included engaging the community through citizen-science projects or new production initiatives, such as seaweed farming. One food hub in a rural area had entwined its work on food distribution with a local landscape partnership – a collaboration between 12 local projects with the collective aim of preserving the local natural landscape and the cultural history of the area. All the interviewees were keen to emphasize links between food production, conservation and cultural history.

Fairness as an underpinning value

Fairness – to farmers, customers and employees – was a widely shared value. Their ability to **conduct business in a fair way** was a defining value for the hubs – and was often linked to the fact that their business models (for example as co-operatives or social enterprises), meant they did not have to prioritise making a profit. (Even so, generating enough income to pay fair prices and wages was a widespread preoccupation.)

All the hubs interviewed took pride in treating their employees well. One hub offered its staff a flat pay rate, produce discount, childcare, a maternity package, a generous pension contribution, and private healthcare. For this hub, the prioritization of staff wellbeing and the ability to deliver these benefits was directly attributed to the fact that the hub was not pursuing financial profit:

> *'There's something quite radical, I think, in the way that we organize and the way that we trade ... There's no one here to make a quick buck out of any of this'.*

Another hub felt that **having a not-for-profit model improved the quality of relationships with their customers.** Strong relationships within the organisation were said to translate into higher quality relationships with the local community:

> *'We have an incredibly loyal customer base who appreciate that we're not here for people to profiteer or singularly benefit, that it's about how we extend that benefit to as many people as possible'.*

Some hubs had chosen to manage themselves as workers' co-operatives as the best way to put their values into practice. One hub argued that as well as benefiting suppliers, staff and customers, upholding co-operative principles secured the longevity of the organisation:

> *'We anticipate that [the] business will outlive us all and will be here to serve the community in this way for many generations to come'.*

Values subject to trade-offs

Every food hub faced barriers when putting its values into practice. Torn between creating convenience for customers, delivering fair prices to suppliers and operating in what they saw as the most sustainable fashion, hubs were forced to make difficult choices. For example, while vegetables remain fresh for longer in plastic, choosing to use plastic is seen by some to have a negative impact on the environment. **Overall, decisions are a balancing act between the hubs' values and external pressures.**

All the hubs were aware of this need to compromise, but saw it differently. One interviewee described a system of **'virtuous circles'** that allowed the hub to balance its values synergistically:

> *'The better you're functioning economically, the better your ability to be a bit more philanthropic … the more your company is seen to do social good, the more it makes you attractive to customers who want to spend their money ethically. So, you get these virtuous circles'.*

By contrast, another interviewee felt the **compromises that had to be made impinged on their hub's ability to meet its goals.** This hub wanted to provide sustainable food at an accessible price, but this was not possible with its model, which the interviewee thought was similar to a supermarket model, just on a smaller scale. The hub found it impossible to keep prices low enough to be accessible to people on a low income. Therefore, the interviewee felt that the hub was not able to provide anything beyond a route to market for small-scale organic producers, which is not its only goal. They argued that trading fruit and vegetables within their hub's model would not fix the structural problems the UK food system faces. Whilst the hub could try to do some good, it was limited by broader societal issues (such as poverty and inequality) which it did not have the power to address.

Values may have to change over time

Some hubs' values have changed over time. For example, several hubs were established as part of the Transition movement. Initially, these hubs had been set up to address concerns around peak oil and food security. They wanted to prevent relying on imports to improve UK food production. However, in recent years, their focus has changed – along with public opinion – towards issues of climate change and sustainability.

Other hubs, however, have not changed, and one interviewee was concerned that the values on which their hub was established might now be out of date. At this hub, environmental decisions were guided by research conducted over a decade ago, which may no longer be valid or relevant. The interviewee linked this to its governance structure of employee-ownership (argued by other interviews to bring multiple benefits), which in this instance was said to make change slow.

Most of the interviewees thought that the guiding values of their hubs would change in the future, whether as a response to recent developments in science or to a particular need in their communities.

Overall, **all the hubs were flexible and responsive to changes in their communities. As the needs of their communities change, so do the hubs' guiding values, in order to stay useful and impactful.**[4]

Conclusions

Despite key differences, all of the hubs shared an ambition to achieve positive social, environmental, and economic impact for the communities in which they were embedded. They articulated these ambitions through strong values which guide their work, towards a fundamental goal to change the current local food system. But in striving to realise their values, they encountered challenges.

Firstly, **the values of a hub are circumscribed by its context.** Hubs exist within the framework of the dominant food system, which may lead them to compromise (for example nearby supermarkets may sell fruit and vegetables out of season). Hubs also exist in specific geographic and social settings, to which they are very attuned, and which shapes and may constrain what they can do. Each hub approaches these problems differently: accordingly, they conceptualize their values in different ways. Ultimately, these differences came down **what the interviewees believed that their hub could feasibly achieve within their context and value framework.** The balancing act highlighted the mismatch between the societal expectations of hubs and the reality of what they can provide.

Secondly, many hubs had adopted cooperative values. **Being employee-owned and managed was seen as a strategy for economic viability** that enabled these hubs to put their environmental and social values into practice.

Thirdly, the **motivating values and guiding principles of hubs were subject to change and development over time.** This pragmatism was seen as a virtue when it allowed hubs to adapt to changing external circumstances. However, it was evident that the longer-established hubs had more capacity to deliver upon their values than less established hubs. Interviews with hubs that were less than 10 years old suggested there was **an early period where hubs were compelled to compromise or accept trade-offs** to remain financially viable.

Finally, the decision-making required to develop values, or even compromise on them, **provided a useful opportunity within organisations to debate complex questions** about environmental sustainability, and social and economic impact. This ability **to be reflective about their guiding values makes food hubs more resilient** and may help them achieve long-standing impact in their communities.

References

1 The data for this discussion paper is taken from semi-structured interviews with representatives from seven food hubs and one national network of food hubs. The participating hubs were spread across seven regions of the UK, including the South West, South East, East, Yorkshire, and North West of England; West Wales and Central Scotland. The interviews, designed to determine hubs' perceptions of sustainability, were carried out in June and July 2021.

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4 To see this reflected in the US Food Hub literature: Levkoe, C. Z., Hammelman, C., Craven, L., Dandy, G., Farbman, J., Harrison, J., & Mount, P. 2018. 'Building sustainable food systems through food hubs: Practitioner and academic perspectives'. Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 8(2), 107–122.

The Food Research Collaboration is an initiative of the Centre for Food Policy, facilitating joint working between academics and civil society organisations to improve the UK food system, and making academic knowledge available wherever it may be useful.

We are grateful to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding our work.

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ISBN: 978-1-903957-75-2
Series editor: Rosalind Sharpe

Please cite as: Hammans, H. and Driessen, B. 2022. *Defining Values: How Food Hubs put their principles into practice.* Food Research Collaboration Evidence Paper.

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