

HOW CAN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROCESSES CONTRIBUTE TO FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION?

Exploring community participation & food citizenship

BACKGROUND

Many propose bottom-up or participatory approaches as both an essential pathway for food system transformation (Duncan et al., 2022), and a desirable outcome in the form of a more democratic food system (Kropp et al., 2020). FoodSEqual is a 5-year transdisciplinary project exploring co-production approaches, including engaging people to be community food researchers (CFRs) (Pettinger et al., 2023) who co-deliver research in their own communities. This PhD studentship research is exploring the CFRs experiences. The aims are to understand how participatory processes can support or contribute towards food system transformation, and to identify good practice for delivering participatory initiatives.

METHODS

Interviews were completed with 12 CFRs between 2021-2024. Creative methods used included walking interviews, collaborative mapping, use of poetic inquiry in the analysis, and creating sociological fiction. The analysis and interpretation involved ongoing 'reflexive participant collaboration' (Motulsky, 2021), in the form of individual discussions, feedback on outputs, and a workshop.



REFLECTIONS ON CONSTRAINTS

WE ARE BUILDING CAPACITY BUT THERE IS LIMITED POWER

In FoodSEqual, the CFRs have been involved in some decisions, but parts of the project were fixed in advance. Additionally, although policy and other recommendations can be proposed, the CFRs are unlikely to be part of decisions on whether such changes happen. The scope of participation by the wider public is even more limited. This is similar to findings of a scoping review by Candel (2022), also described by Pateman (1970) as *partial participation* (see: Stage and Ingerslev, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes from our research demonstrate that the process of engagement and collaboration in itself could contribute to food systems transformation. This suggests it is worth carefully considering how we design and deliver our food system transformation initiatives to maximise the co-benefits and impacts achieved.

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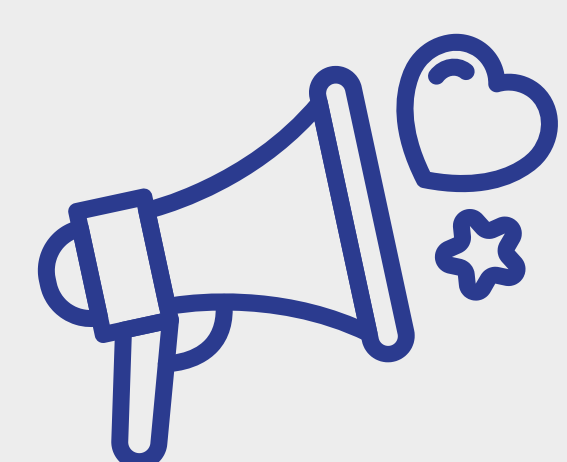
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RESULTS

HOW THE ENGAGEMENT MODE AND PROCESS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION.

Development of the conditions for food democracy

Community members built connections with immediate neighbours, and the belief their opinions matter; important for democratic participation.

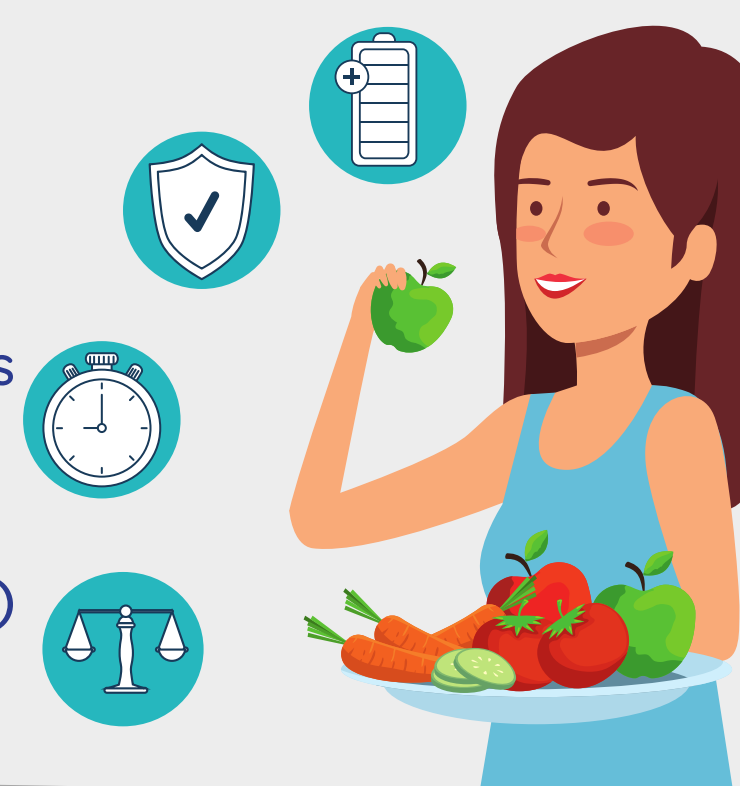


The CFRs gained skills, knowledge and connections; building capacities to become catalysts for change, and to support knowledge to move within and beyond the community (Schiller-Merkens and Machin, 2023).

Enhanced food citizenship capacities & food literacy

Food citizenship capacities or tendencies developed include:

- learning more about food challenges (both locally and at a systems level); increasing motivation to make change.
- sharing food knowledge, learning new things; enhancing food literacy.
- changing perceptions about food industry actors (e.g. supermarkets) to have more understanding of their constraints.



DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW PARTICIPATION CAN BE SHAPED TO PROMOTE POSITIVE OUTCOMES

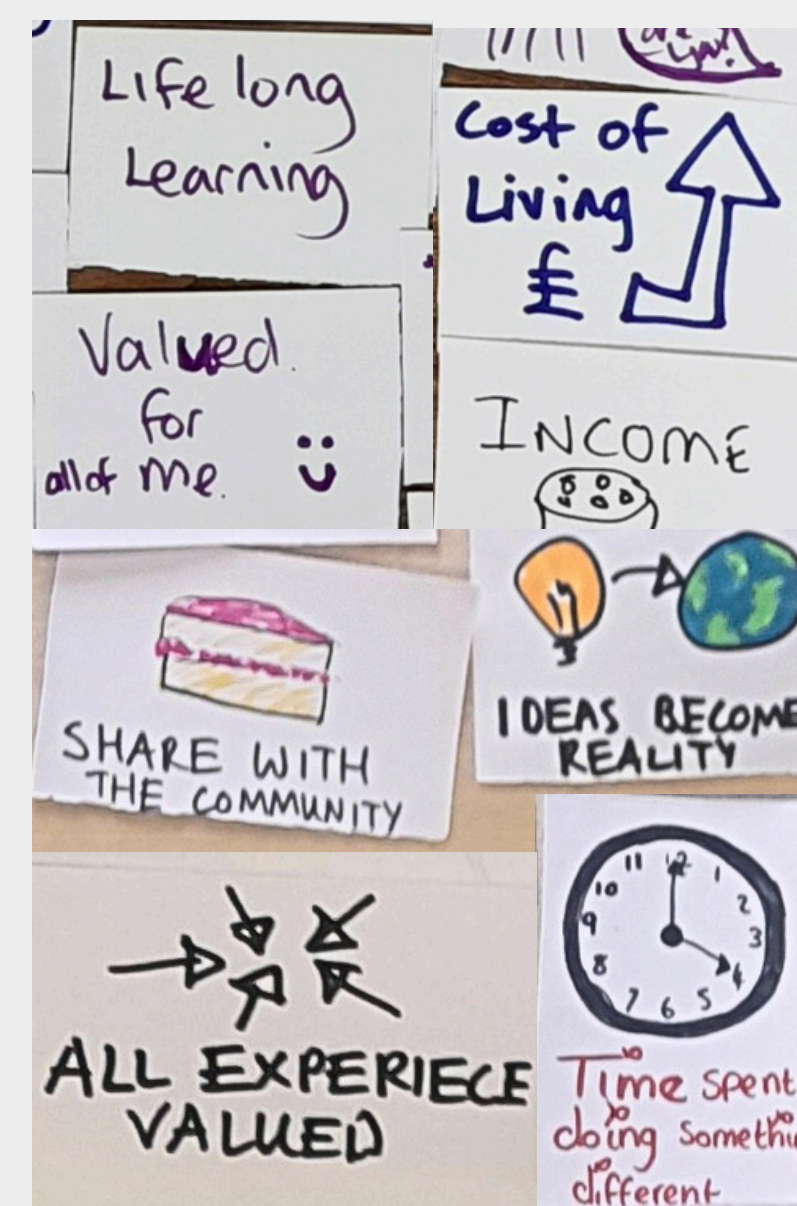
Valuing assets community collaborators bring

People engaged as CFRs had different backgrounds, career histories, and connections within the community. Making time to map these assets, and what each person wants to bring to the project can help people feel valued, build confidence, and bring additional benefits for The Project. This requires sufficient flexibility in project delivery.

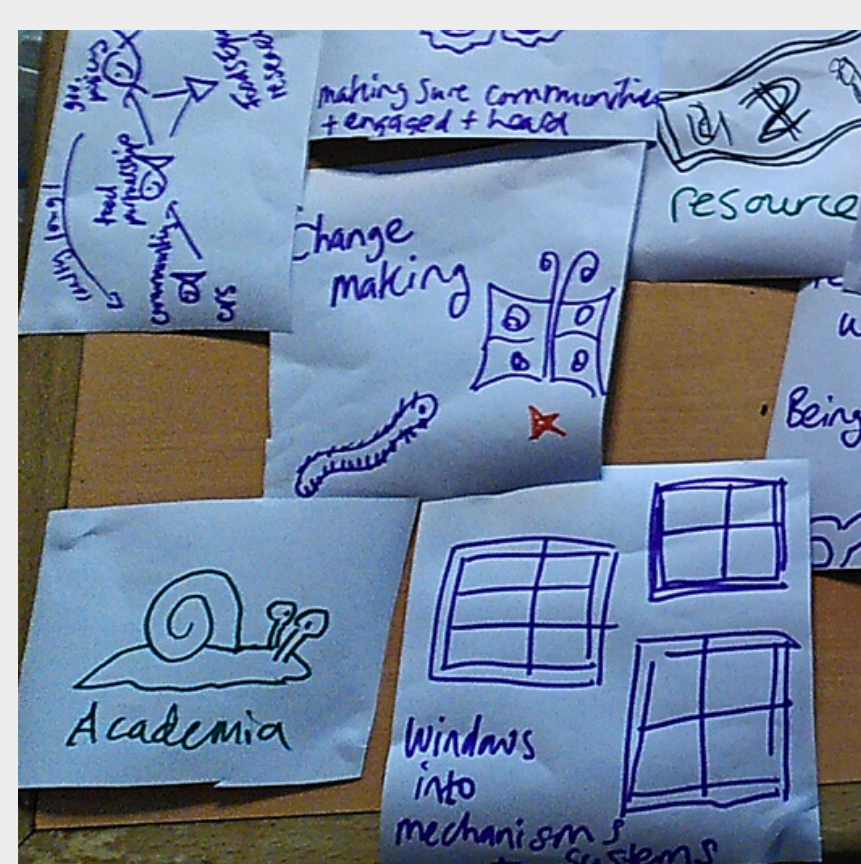


Designing roles to suit people with different life circumstances & engaging the Jobcentre

Some people's life circumstances meant a small number of hours and flexible work suited them. Others struggled to stay engaged as they needed more income. We recommend designing different roles so people with differing life circumstances are able to engage.



The Jobcentre put pressure and stress on some people. If universities made contact with the jobcentre, they could mitigate this. For example by establishing the roles as training or apprenticeship opportunities.



Designing projects so community partners can take findings forward quickly.

A big motivator was wanting to make change, both for the CFRs, and the wider community participants. However, the rate of change achieved by universities is slow, it can take years for academic articles to be published from which further action will be taken. Community partners can take work forwards more quickly and make change on the ground. But the projects need to be designed so they can access data and act on it. Building in funding for partners to take action would also be useful.

