

Gentrification, food justice and London



an evening of discussion hosted by the Community Food Growers Network

Minutes from the event

5 August 2018

Introductions

Zahra: The food movement was rooted in quite radical beliefs, but now when you think about organic food, you think about organic baked beans in Waitrose, which aren't useful for anyone, really. And we were also seeing community food projects being driven out by processes of gentrification, while at the same time a lot of food projects were being seen as not being accessible for everyone- not necessarily the working class, people of colour who were dominant in the area - it was more the white, middle class people. And a lot of it is about perceptions - can you afford the veg, is this place for you. So it's a really complex conversation that we're trying to have today - and it's exciting.

I got involved in CFGN through a backwards route - through housing and anti-gentrification activities, into land rights, and then through that exploring how food and housing and related to land. It has been interesting to look at how food growing can exist in the London context, and how it can be a mode of resistance. I grew up in Southeast London, in Brockley - and similarly to a lot of people on the panel, I get a lot of emotions walking through Pop Brixton.

Betiel: I got involved in activism as a way of saving my home. I used to live in Brixton for 11 years, but then when the Guinness trust decided that Brixton was "the place to be", they tried to evict us after 11 years, without an obligation to rehouse us. That's how I got into campaigning, and understanding gentrification and what was happening to Brixton. Once we fought and campaigned for a long time, we got displaced in different places. The people who fought the

most stayed close to the area, to their communities, schools, jobs. After that I got involved in a campaign about “affordable housing” - which is 80% of market rent, which is unaffordable, and it means that it ensures that people cannot stay in, return to the places where their communities are.

Farzana: I coordinate Voices that Shake, a social justice organisation working with young people. We ran a programme called Food Fight to unpack the politics of food, and to look at what food has got to do with race and class- which is everything. We also co- founded healing justice collective in London, which is looking at non Eurocentric methods of community repair and healing. Based on experiences of gentrification in London and Tower Hamlets, we’re aiming to hold a restorative space for people to strategise around fighting oppression.

Dee Woods: Granville Community Kitchen, South Kilburn and Brent
Our neighbourhood has been undergoing gentrification for ten years, through a programme of “redevelopment” that is being launched – but what we see is disruption, dispersal and displacement, and ultimately the erasure of working class people, poor people, sick and disabled people, people of colour and migrants. The area is sterile, and not what it used to be. And food is wrapped up in that – food is one of the drivers of gentrification. Starbucks, Costa are replacing traditional food shops. The work we do with the community kitchen comes out of a history of working with youth and community, work with black women and feminism, and ultimately the work of decolonising. For us in the UK, we need to centre ourselves in our own history, rather than imported narratives from elsewhere. How has our food system started and how does it impact us – how do we relate to each other in terms of power and ethnicity.

***How do we perceive the role of gentrification in food more broadly?
What is the food that we look towards as the food of the community, and how does the community food movement interact with that? Where is there overlap between food grown in the community, and food of and for the community.***

Dee: by community food we mean food of communities – culturally accessible and affordable. I shouldn’t have to take two buses to buy yam and cassava. Community food growing projects cannot always grow these foods locally – so community food projects can be seen as very exclusive because they are not growing these foods.

Farzana: Gentrified spaces often use the word community, but they mean a specific group that doesn’t look like me. When I think of food in my community, I think of neighbours cooking for each other, of food being used in moments of loss or triumph to bring people together. This is not how community food currently sits – it’s about going somewhere and buying that food. We can’t have this conversation without interrogating dynamics of power and access – it’s hard to talk about community food growing projects without looking at wider structures that mean that

other concerns have to be prioritised- issues like safety - are my kids going to come home alive, and stop and searches. Food is integral to our lives, but often gets deprioritised in this context.

Betiel: We used to have an allotment in Loughborough park. The whole thing about community is a con – it's become a buzzword. It can be quite arrogant, to think that the people coming in to do projects, that it's only them who thought of it. Other people who live there have also had these ideas - but you see people coming in and saying “you know that corner of the park where young people hang around, lets make some art, grow some food there” – the community has already thought of that, they just didn't have access to money, time, energy to make it happen. The last thing they have time to do is fight with a councillor about growing food on a patch of ground.

Green spaces are often the first to go in the process of gentrification – these little things happen before the big Starbucks come in. It's also artists, musicians – thinking that the people who live there haven't already had those ideas.

Ian: May Project Gardens, have run independently for 11 years – work in Loughborough junction, and although we aren't necessarily from that area we bring in a lot of expertise and skills.



Zahra: *Something that's coming up a bit is the idea of parachuting in – how can community food growing projects be more mindful of working with the community rather than “working for”? And also examining the idea of privilege – food growers who can write a great funding application, speak the language of targeting anti social behaviour, can access things that folks from the community may be challenged in doing. How do we address that?*

Ian: We try to employ people locally, work with people who are rooted in the community - that's a bit part of how we address that and something we are really committed to. We work with young people – we run programmes and development work that is mindful of gentrification and

equip young people to challenge it. We run pop up cafes with the young people, allow and empower young people to economically benefit from gentrification. We talk about it - "Your area is changing, how can you challenge that and benefit from the change, be part of it."

Dee: but should they be part of that change? Co creation of projects and change is really important: at Wolves Lane, we've managed to acquire local authority land and greenhouses to set up a community food hub. Includes Crop Drop – food distribution – London Grown and Organiclea - food growers- and includes work on healthy eating. One thing we've come across since taking on the space is that it is a community space – not just a food growing space – but a place for people to meet and see each other. Instead of us going in there with a specific vision, the consortium are taking the time to create something that truly meets the needs of people in the community. It's about working differently to how power usually operates.

Betiel: If a project comes in and wants to do something, then that project needs to listen, and meet certain community members who can bring people in. Do less assumption – don't assume you know things better than people who live there. If you meet with people, you can listen, and find out what people need to feel that the space is accessible. A lot of people come into a community, and act as if they are the experts.

Zahra: Moving beyond some of the problems, what is the radical potential for food growing? In a city where you are highly politicised and securitised, growing food is a way to take some power back. What can that look like in London and how does that interact with other modes of resistance?

Dee: It is social justice – not just food justice. We are fighting various oppressions – Granville Community Kitchen is a centre of resistance, the garden is a site of resistance, when we plant we say that we aren't going anywhere, when we cook and eat and laugh together every Friday, we are saying- we aren't moving. And we need to be doing this more, and with more people. So all of us who are food growers big or small, how do we contribute to that wider struggle. Whether it's engaging with the local authorities to change things, or working with communities, we need to be doing that.

Ian: London is 40% green space, we have the potential to create a very self sufficient system. You can only get justice if you contextualise the history of the uK. We don't talk about the colonial legacy of - for example - chocolate. So when we do this work, we need to be mindful of that. In the area we work with, just getting young people to touch the earth and cook food is resistance, cause we're trying to get them out of this pressure camp. The young black men we work with are under assault every day – we chose to do the work because we're passionate about it, and we're not just parachuting in, but because we do have expertise and we are going into places where we are needed. So I would like to see more young people to move away from violence, gang culture – people say "they'll never grow food, they'll never cook vegan food" – but they are doing that, and that is a form of resistance.

Farzana: When we started youth work, mums would drop their kids off at the youth centre because that was the only place where they would get a meal. The kids would come back in order to get fed. Food has been a necessary feature of resistance – and the NGO arena has become very neoliberal, and all of us have the capacity to be unmaking the structures of oppression, and in the food growing movement, with people with property, and land, and niche skills like fundraising – then those people need to be shifting power and resources to people who are most impacted. It's not just for those of us with a lot of privilege – but through this work all of us have accumulated skills, influence – we get to sit at the table. So all of us need to be responsible for shifting power. Shame has been used by the food movement – whether it's gentrifiers or hipsters – whether it's about fried food and chicken, or veganism, hygiene. Food regulations attack a lot of traditional food markets. That relationship between shame and power is really central.



Zahra: *Things are normal growing up for black and brown working class people – friends getting killed, mental health problems – shouldn't be normal. How do we make sure that the opportunities and resources of community growing projects is accessible without being required to be referred by a service, or a parent being engaged enough to send them to a service?*

Ian: Through the Hip Hop Garden project, we use the culture that we are surrounded with to engage. Replace imagery of violence, knives – with vegetables. Hip hop came out of the ghetto – not the MTV version – but it came out of a place of struggle, resistance. Young people understand the language and resonance of hip hop culture, and that's how we reach out to them.

Audience member: I'm from Myatts Field South, and have been running food growing projects for a lot of years. We were commissioned and funded by Tate Modern to do growing work – so

you see the co-optation of local community by bigger institutions. We've had youth and local schools involved, we've worked with the street homeless, people with mental health issues. We have wildflower hedges, food that people can come in and pick. After the artist designed the garden and the funders lose interest in a few years, a lot of projects fall by the wayside. We were determined that this wouldn't happen.

Groundwork does parachute people in, white middle class people coming onto a housing estate, and then funders bugger off after a few years. Why don't we have a food market on Lower Marsh anymore – because it's all geared towards a South Bank, shi shi crowd. So yes there does need to be a connection with history, awareness of historical context -working with the Tate, bringing up where sugarcane comes from. We've lost people from knife crimes – but at the moment of people coming into a garden, family members engaging, then you know you're doing something good.

Lesley (Audience): “engaging people” can be difficult – people often don't expect to be listened to. How to go out to people who are different – what are good ways to invite people to join in to something that seems irrelevant, looks like hard work, can seem gross, dirty – any practical tips?

Farzana: I hate that we need to be in a structure where outreach and engagement are a thing- why can't we let food do the work that it's designed for: feeding people. How can food uplift that work? So I really struggle with the terms of “engagement”, because it's about power dynamics. Whatever our work is, wherever we are doing the work of justice, it's uplifting the issues that are crucial to that community, and uplifting that.

Audience member: but sometimes it can be hard to identify what that need is, how do you know if you're approaching this the right way?

Betiel: I don't know much about the food movement, but I know that to engage people with Loughborough, the idea of protesting, campaigning wasn't clear. The first thing is to communicate. You need to know something about that community – and it takes for a long time to build that trust. But it's about finding a common thing. Just don't come in with ideas of your own. Consultation exercises are too often a box ticking exercises – they are leading questions.

Ian: I use my house for the project, which makes us unique. I'm not part of the system, so I had to identify what resources I had – which was my house. It's not always about going out, it can be about going in. Our journey has been long and hard – we've told councils to F off. It takes time, there's no short term fix.

Zahra: I'm not a food grower, but it seems to me that it takes as long to build trust as it takes to turn soil good.

Dee: We need to remember – why are we doing this work. It's because of all of those entrenched isms, how are we going to tackle that.

Audience member: I was one of the people who created the Hive Dalston, we were given a building by a local developer, and ran events, exhibitions on a donation basis. Definitions of community are different across different parts of London. The “actual locals” only came to the venue for events after a year and a half, after we had some articles in the newspaper. So it's very difficult. In terms of getting into local people, it's not one way fits all – it's important to be mindful of the environment a project is in.

Zahra: So it's not just about doing outreach, it's about shifting the centre, being able to lead from the back.

Rachel, Crop Drop (Audience Member): Coming from a background of running a business, making decisions and getting things done – can be quite simple and quick. But having a four acre piece of land, with lots of politics, means that the way that I'm used to operating isn't appropriate – I've had to really examine my white privilege, and change the way that I work, and it's very challenging – and I am still very much in a space where I don't know how to operate and how to move forward. But it's good to hear that other people are going through the same process - the long process of building trust and finding new ways to work.

Farzana: We were talking a lot about trust, and it's important to consider what makes people precarious. People I see as long-standing allies, aren't ones who are just there for the boxes they want to tick. We've got a system in London that's dismembering and relocating us – we are losing our ecosystems. With that in mind, if people are being made precarious in lots of ways - housing, employment- they aren't able to show up. So sometimes conversations about outreach and engagement feel tangential – what is stopping people from showing up even for themselves. So unless you are dismantling the systems that mean that people cannot show up for themselves, why would they show up for something that you are doing. And we can't lose that focus when we're doing food growing work.

Ian: We make mistakes all the time, that's part of the journey. It's important to show that you don't have all the answers. The fact that I open my home to everyone shows that I'm open to being vulnerable, we're going to go on this journey together. How do you manage to do this project for 11 years without funding? Relationships. Hold space to make people feel protected. To listen – there isn't enough listening. Human beings and community are a resource – we need to tap it. It's heavy work we're doing, we need to be more like children and play. rejuvenate.

Audience member: I'm coming from a place where I live on an estate, we have lots of community, we all know each other – I've started growing food, but I don't have a good idea of how to grow food. So where do you get the information from?

Zahra: Join CFGN!

Ian: Find out what young people like, and grow what they want. We started with cooking, because young people were more interested in final product than growing. Not interested in healthy vegan food? Take another step back.

Dee: There can be a lot of experience in the community, especially among the elders – coming from other countries, initially wanting to get away from the land – this has had long term bad effects.

Audience member: I run a social enterprise teaching people how to cook nomadically called Life After Hummus – I want to talk about engagement. We don't have issues with people showing up. I base it on my experience – left home at 15, and I'm able to tailor my workshops to people living in bedsits with one cooking ring. But it's also important to share space – hard to access spaces for publicity and outreach. Really hard to find spaces that let you access them, but a lot of groups that only have a little don't feel like they can share because they're afraid of losing what they have. But you can't give up. Doors are more open because Councils have cuts and are more interested in using underutilised space and resources. But there are no spaces for them to use, within budget. And licensing is also another barrier – so you have to become a planning, business rates expert. But if your council isn't behind you, helping you with space, publicity, how can you empower people.

*** Break for delicious dinner ***



Closing - what ideas and thoughts have really made an impact on you this evening?

Dee: We're not ready yet to go to the bigger things, we need to do reparative work, more things like this, eating together and connecting and talking to each other and visiting other places and projects. Learning from each other.

Ian: Collaborative working – I come to a lot of these events and get really stimulated, exciting conversations- but it's not a commitment to follow through. This commitment to reinventing projects, and working with other projects. Before you think about creating something new, find out what other people are doing, and support that, prop it up.

Natalie: It was really eye opening to hear the role of shame so well articulated, really important because its so embedded in mainstream food movement, how do we create a discourse that challenges unhealthy eating and an unsustainable food system without being a dickhead.

Audience member: In school, chicken shops are very cheap, and I wouldn't consider getting anything healthy, we used to all go to get chicken after school – how are we planning to reach this demographic, of young people at chicken shops. Lots of people would be interested in this, it's just not seen as a viable option right now.

Ian: We showed a virtual tour of factory farming, and some of the young people we work with have given up chicken from that. You have to use various tactics. Any small shift is to be celebrated. The reason they love vegan food is because they can see its potential to make money. If that's what gets them into it, do it – tap into what they care about.

Zahra: There is a richness of different ways that people have approached reach and engagement, and it manifests in different ways. It would be really useful for CFGN to create information, resources about this. CFGN can continue to create spaces like this.

Dee: I'd like to invite everyone to Good Food Good Farming, a celebration at the end of October (maybe at Wolves Lane) a celebration of food, song, stories, dance. We've come through a lot in fighting in these movements, and we need things to sustain us. And to take a stand and say it is our food system.

Ian: I just wanted to recognise that some people haven't spoken, and everyone has something to bring to the room, but some people are less comfortable participating in this format.

Zahra: A lot of us are battling the same stuff, so it's always useful to reach out and engage. A couple things to end the event on are:

End Capitalism! And the question we need to be asking ourselves is "Who are you here for?" It's easy to end up doing something for yourself, rather than working towards what you initially started working for.