

Co-benefits of engaging local people to be community researchers and provide evidence for ‘bottom-up’ policymaking

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Introduction: This research is part of FoodSEqual, a 5-year UKRI-funded project. FoodSEqual aims to develop food system changes which will benefit people from low income communities through co-design and co-production with people from those communities. Part of FoodSEqual’s model involves training and employing local people to carry out research in their own communities as ‘community food researchers’ (CFRs) (Pettinger et al., 2023). CFRs collaborate with academics who support the community-based investigations. These provide community knowledge and perspectives that inform the wider transdisciplinary research team, including: product development specialists, policy experts, and environmental and supply chain modelers; as well as industry and policy actors who are on the advisory board.

This PhD draws from ethnography, including collaborative (Lassiter, 2005) and creative approaches (Douglas-Jones, 2021; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2017). **Methods:** 12 interviews, 50+ hours observations, and 6 reflective sessions. The **research goals** include understanding how the CFR model works, what the impacts are, and exploring the CFR’s experiences. **Emerging findings** demonstrate the benefits of the model for research, including: enhancing community participation, the importance of ‘being comfortable’ for inclusive practice, how CFRs bring additional insight to analysis and interpretation, and that the delivery process produces co-benefits. The co-benefits point is explored further here. Analysis is still underway. These emerging findings are from initial analysis and ongoing collaborative work with CFRs.

Building relationships and connections - ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital

CFRs brought existing long-term relationships as a valuable resource, enabling efficient engagement. Through their participation, CFRs also built new relationships and connections within their communities, including to projects and people. Thus the model may contribute community resilience which has been linked to social capitals (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015).

The CFR model may also foster community resourcefulness (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013) including knowledge and skills of interfacing with technocratic systems, and recognition of and sharing of local and experiential knowledge.

Capacities to connect with decision makers - ‘linking’ social capital

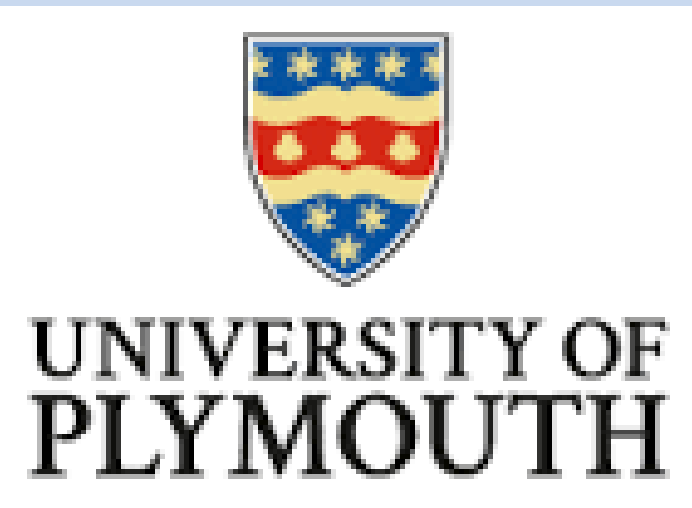
Through their participation, CFRs built relationships with universities and academics, and in some cases met industry and policy actors. What this looks like varies between case studies; influenced by the priorities and connections of coordinators, and what outputs are being produced.

Beyond this, some CFRs have built capacities to communicate with decision makers. This includes confidence, and skills of how to gather information and where and how to present it.

This could also be seen as enhancing ‘political capital’ (Emery and Flora, 2006).

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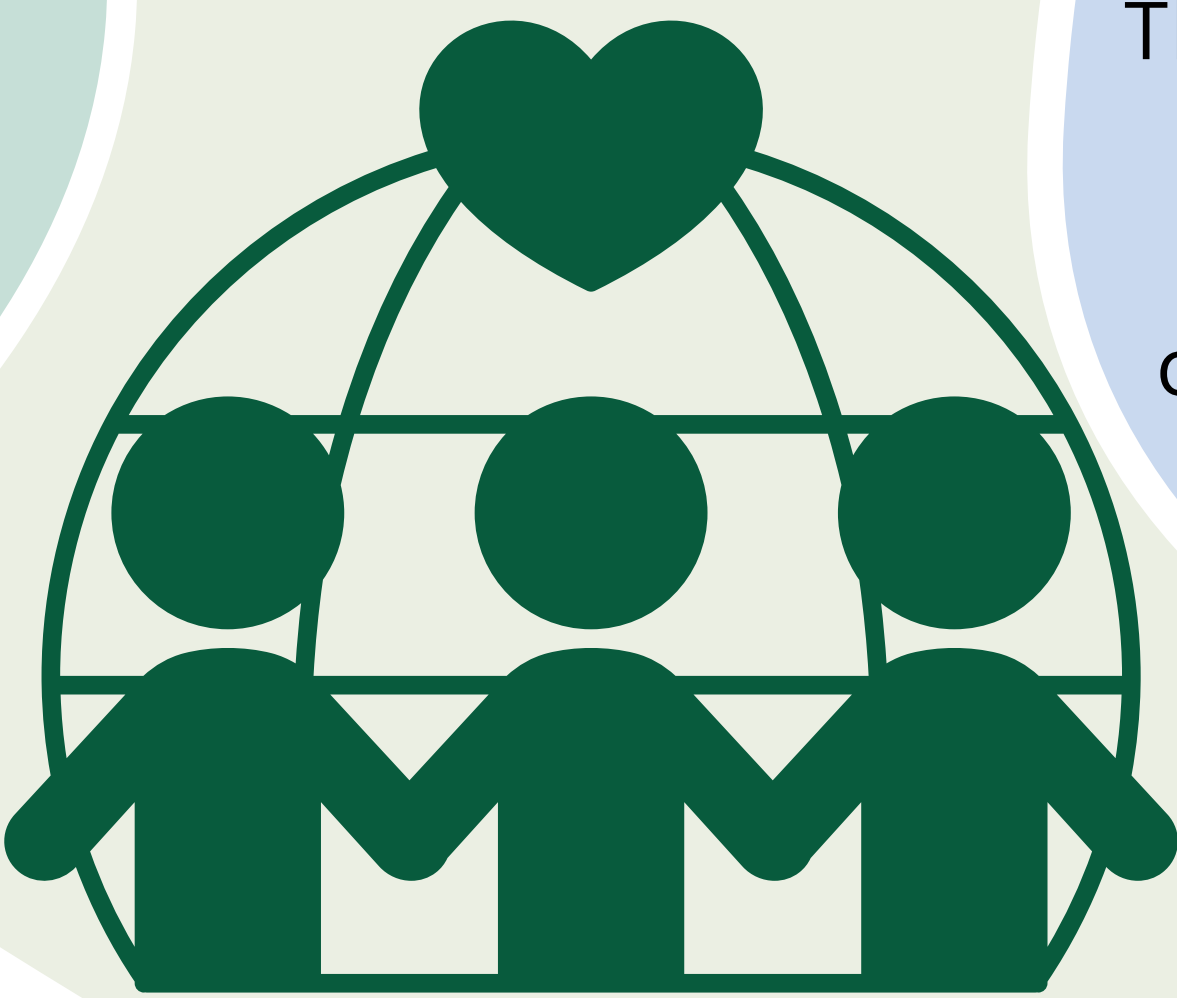
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Note: The exact outcomes are contextual, depending on the organisations, individuals, and situations.

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Community Food Researcher co-benefits

The Community Food Researcher model

Amplifies the voices of those who are disproportionately impacted by food justice issues; to support bottom up policy making, and challenge assumptions which can be reproduced in research (Patrick, 2020).

Enabling the realisation and enhancement of aspirations

CFRs have varied backgrounds, bringing experiential and professional knowledge and skills to the project. However, some did not access further education (for diverse reasons). Their CFR roles have offered unique opportunities to gain skills, experiences and knowledge. CFRs future aspirations include: working on making change, undertaking academic study, continuing community work, and continuing in research roles.

This could be seen as enabling the realisation of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). CFRs may also be gaining competencies to support food systems transformation (Den Boer et al., 2021).

Limitations to the potential

There are a number of conditions within FoodSEqual which may limit the co-benefits from delivering the CFR model. These include:

- Immediate impacts/outputs for the local communities have not been built in to the project. These are considered important for such models to build local resilience (Lloyd-Evans and Oenga, 2023).
- There is a tension between wanting to hear many different voices and engaging on a longer term basis with participants.
- Institutional norms and expectations have sometimes constrained collaboration.

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