

DEVELOPING THE LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY SOIL ASSOCIATION SEMINAR AT BROOMFIELD COLLEGE, DERBY 22ND JULY 1998

CCN members Richard Clare and Darrell Maryon of Sheffield Organic Food Initiative were invited to contribute to this seminar, the purpose of which was to look at how to bring together a wide range of organisations and individuals in effective ways to create sustainable food economies based on local, organically-grown produce.

The morning session concentrated on two main facets essential for the success of local food economies. Firstly, Sara May introduced us to the concept of Farmers' Markets, already very popular in the USA and now occurring regularly in the UK. We were told how these Markets are creating a new (or renewed) direct dialogue between producers and consumers, helping to keep smaller farmers in business and, most importantly, making available quality fresh produce to local populations.

Secondly, Joy Carey explained the Soil Association's forthcoming Food Futures project, a three year programme to develop the locally-grown sector by supporting and cultivating community based food-growing initiatives. The project is designed to focus strongly on making fresh, organically-grown produce available to lower income families and multicultural communities. The Soil Association plans to organise a core group of experts and interested

parties and develop appropriate structures to support practical strategies in local areas. The plan is to help 15 local projects a year for 18 months each over the next three years.

The afternoon workshop, entitled "Community Food Growing Initiatives", which we had been invited to facilitate, developed the issues of such Food Futures projects further and is of direct interest to Community Composters.

We were able to share the decade of practical experiences of this topic with the group who attended this workshop, including representatives of local authorities, LA 21 officers, voluntary and tenant action groups, allotment associations and individuals with an interest in schools and the environment. All were interested either in supporting organic food growing within their community or at least having the opportunity to acquire it from local sources.

Among the many points we highlighted was the necessity of creating local resource loops including, above all else, the collection of putrescible and green waste materials for making composts, mulches and leafmoulds. Without good quality compost, in sufficient quantities, soils are unable to sustain healthy organic crops, especially the depleted and degraded soils typically available in an urban context.

We also described the funding opportunities and community-building capacity of composting projects which are integrated with food-growing initiatives:

whilst not everyone can help directly in food growing, everyone can contribute their discarded materials to be redeemed through the composting process and converted into fresh, organic produce.

The workshop consolidated peoples' awareness of the positive social, economic, health, educational and environmental benefits that local food initiatives are capable of delivering. At the same time, we were careful to ensure that expectations were not raised unrealistically and that everyone understood the commitment and timescales involved in successful projects.

Hopefully, the results of this seminar and the Food Futures programme will be that community composting projects will find opportunities for greater integration and expansion and also that there will be greater demand for locally-produced compost and those with experience in compost-making.

The main conclusion we drew from this seminar was just how essential composting is to the aspirations of projects to develop the local food economy, and therefore how valuable and important it is that the CCN is there to promote expertise in creating safe, food-growing quality compost on the local community level.

