

Social Cohesion, Community Responses to Sustainability, Food Insecurity and Alternative Food Networks: the Case of CoFarm

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About the Report:

This report presents findings from the first phase of work (March 2020-December 2021) focusing on a local community-based agroecology ('co-farming') project in Cambridge, CoFarm Cambridge. Over this period, 25 in-depth interviews were collected, 16 with volunteers in the project and 9 interviews with members of the stakeholder group and the Founder & CEO of CoFarm. Further 10 interviews with beneficiaries of the food hubs have been collected in the second phase of the project which started in January 2022.

Feedback on the contents of this report is welcome. If you would like to get in touch with the team, please email the PI of the project, Dr. Neli Demireva: nvdem@essex.ac.uk

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Executive Summary

In the last decade, the UK has experienced a proliferation of food banks and there are growing concerns about a rise in food insecurity (Loopstra et al., 2019, Loopstra et al., 2015). Even when access to food is adequate, diet quality can be poor, particularly in urban settings, where stress levels and lack of green spaces have been linked to an epidemic of obesity (Dinour et al., 2007). In this context, alternative food networks (AFNs) can play a major role in producing sustainable food, free from chemicals that may inhibit biodiversity and associated ecosystem services, such as pollination, natural pest control, and soil mineralisation, while at the same time increasing human wellbeing in urban areas. This report focuses on the experiences of the volunteers and stakeholders in one such local community-based agroecology ('co-farming') project in Cambridge, CoFarm Cambridge. CoFarm Cambridge is a wholly owned subsidiary of the CoFarm Foundation which was established in 2019 to help "bring people together to grow and share nutritious food, build stronger communities and healthier ecosystems.(Foundation, 2019). Following an extensive community consultation and co-design process (between March 2019 and March 2020), the farm was developed on a site off Barnwell Road, on 7-acres of privately-owned agricultural land in the Green Belt, next to Coldhams Common. The CoFarm model is based on two paid professional horticulturists training and supervising over 500 volunteer 'co-farmers' from the local community, so far. The farm has been highly productive over its first two growing seasons and in 2020 and 2021 has donated its entire harvest, more than 12 tonnes of organically produced fruit and vegetables, to 8 community food hubs in Cambridge city.

As a result of their cofarming experience, volunteers reported greater involvement with community issues and heightened awareness of food justice issues. Thus, alongside other research on this topic (Cox et al., 2008), this study suggests that this form of engagement in an alternative food network can have important community benefits which can be further strengthened through communication and the active involvement of various community actors including volunteers themselves who can bring a lot of energy and knowledge to the project. Many reported that cofarming had been responsible for keeping them in good mental health during the lockdown which aligns with findings in the social prescribing literature (Chatterjee et al., 2018, Drinkwater et al., 2019, Husk et al., 2020). None of our interviewees questioned the decision for all produce to be donated during Covid19 emergency and in fact identified it as an important aspect of the cofarming activity.

I. Introduction

In the last decade, the UK has experienced a proliferation of food banks and there are growing concerns about a rise in food insecurity (Loopstra et al., 2019, Loopstra et al., 2015). Even when access to food is adequate, diet quality can be poor, particularly in urban settings, where stress levels and lack of green spaces have been linked to an epidemic of obesity (Dinour et al., 2007). In this context, alternative food networks (AFNs) can play a major role in producing sustainable food, free from chemicals that may inhibit biodiversity and associated ecosystem services, such as pollination, natural pest control, and soil mineralisation, while at the same time increasing human wellbeing in urban areas. This report focuses on the experiences of the volunteers and stakeholders in one such local community-based agroecology ('co-farming') project in Cambridge, CoFarm Cambridge. CoFarm Cambridge is a wholly owned subsidiary of the CoFarm Foundation which was established in 2019 to help "bring people together to grow and share delicious, nutritious food and help build stronger, healthier ecosystems and communities" (Foundation, 2019). Following an extensive community consultation and co-design process (between March 2019 and March 2020), the farm was developed on a site off Barnwell Road, on 7-acres of privately-owned agricultural land in the Green Belt, next to Coldhams Common. The CoFarm model is based on two paid professional horticulturists training and supervising over 500 volunteer 'co-farmers' from the local community, so far. The farm has been highly productive over its first two growing seasons and in 2020 and 2021 has donated its entire harvest, more than 12 tonnes of organically produced fruit and vegetables, to 8 community food hubs in Cambridge city.

Whereas the majority of studies looking at AFNs have focused on case studies of community-supported agricultural schemes (CSAs), this report explores the goals and motivations of volunteers and stakeholders in a different model, and its importance for the local community during the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike CSAs which, occasionally, during the course of the year, may include social gatherings and work events for members to become involved in beyond investing, the CoFarm model is designed to draw significantly on the volunteer labour of the members of the local community and the CoFarm Foundation has argued that in the face of combined climate, biodiversity and health inequality crises, community farming can ensure the development of a different relationship between food producers and consumers, one

that can further benefit the broader community through associational involvement. Associations have important educational aspects – they teach members at the micro-level how to be a better part of the community, to cooperate more effectively and trust more and it is often hypothesized that regular interactions within voluntary organisations can cement trust in other people through the general sense that individuals can be relied upon to fulfil their social duties (Putnam, 1993). It is, of course, likely that community farm volunteers constitute a very selected group; those willing to get involved may already be more open, collaborative and civic-minded people, with a particular socio-demographic profile. Yet, with more than 500 volunteers being part of the first two growing seasons during the Covid-19 pandemic, and with the decision to donate its entire harvest to eight community food hubs, CoFarm represents an interesting case study that this report explores.

The report begins by outlining the general profile of alternative food networks and community-supported agricultural schemes, particularly in the UK, provides a brief introduction of the CoFarm model and how it became part of efforts to tackle food insecurity in the local community during the Covid-19 pandemic. It then presents the methodological framework of the study and goes on to discuss the motivations of volunteers and stakeholders in the CoFarm project. Further in-depth qualitative work with beneficiaries of the CoFarm produce will be presented in a follow up report focusing on the established food hubs.

II. Background

2.1. Alternative Food Networks and Community Supported Agricultural Schemes

A growing body of literature has focused on alternative food networks (AFNs) and case studies of community-supported agricultural schemes (Cox et al., 2008, Forssell and Lankoski, 2015, Goodman et al., 2012, Jarosz, 2008, Michel-Villarreal et al., 2019). Although some authors see these as primarily rural initiatives (Renting et al., 2003), others argue that they can form the basis of practical urban solutions to tackle the joint environmental and food crisis (Jarosz, 2008). Alternative food networks often rise up in opposition to embedded traditional food networks that operate on a larger spatial scale and employ industrial farming methods (Venn et al., 2006, Holloway et al., 2007); and, politically, AFNs may encapsulate popular forms of mobilization against

corporate food networks or against regulatory disputes between commercial and government players, for example in the case of genetically modified foods (Barry, 2001). Furthermore, these are primarily local initiatives that aim to deliver fair trade, quality and locally produced foods while at the same time providing a closer bond between consumers and producers (Goodman et al., 2012). In many such ventures, there is an established focus on ethics of care as constructed across the spaces of food production and consumption, and often articulated in sustainability terms as connected to the idea of pesticides-free countryside. In the European context, alternative food networks can be considered important developments with significant contribution to the transition from a conventional intensive and productivist agriculture to a sustainable model that provides quality food while generating greater environmental and social goods (Renting et al., 2003).

One of the most often studied forms of alternative food networks are community-supported agricultural (CSA) schemes. CSA schemes represent local people investing in a farm or a crop before the harvesting period, in an attempt to provide some form of guarantee for the farmer that essentially then shares the risk of food production within the local community (Cox et al., 2008). The people who have invested in the farm get a share of the harvest but the benefits of such exchanges can extend further as the investors have the potential to build a relationship with the farmers and other people in the CSAs although CSAs can vary widely in the degree of involvement of their members (Cox et al., 2008, Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). CSAs can foster simultaneously a greater understanding of the food cycle while aiding local community development. Thus, CSAs have often been the focus of studies that try to understand whether food produced and social interactions engineered in this way has the potential to introduce larger-scale social change (Cox et al., 2008) as a result of the direct marketing which is an essential element of a CSA's charter, and ultimately produces a viable economic exchange combined with a politically weighted practice.

These ideas of possible further benefits to the local community align with research on trust and social connectedness. One of the key figures in this area, Robert Putnam (1993) distinguishes between associations' internal effects on their members and the possible external effects on the political system and its cohesiveness in general. Thus, Putnam describes associations as schools of democracy with a strong educational aspect – they teach members at the micro-level how to be better part of the community, one that cooperates better and trusts more. According to Putnam et al. (1993, pp. 89-90), 'associations instil in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity

and public-spiritedness'. This form of socialization through organizational involvement can ensure that the members of the community organization become citizens with the right habits of the heart (Newton, 2001, Newton, 1997) – citizens who are ready to extend their goodwill to others and solve global problems. It is easy to see how such endeavours can be particularly important in societies faced by global challenges such as the climate emergency, in which alternative sources of influence represented by voluntary associations can become important intermediaries and provide the institutional links between members and the political system (Putnam et al. 1993).

Whereas a lot of research on the larger societal benefits of AFNs has focused on CSAs as will be overviewed in the next section, there are indications that in the alternative food stream “the scattered assortment of much smaller efforts” may also be quite important for our understanding of the changing food climate and local responses to emergencies (Grey, 2000) especially as they may espouse important new forms of political agendas and consciousness (Allen et al., 2003). This report focuses on one such venture, CoFarm, an urban 7-acre farm site operational since 2020 which is managed by paid horticulturists, who supervise, train and coordinate volunteers from the local community. The report explores CoFarm as a case study and the outreach of the model through the eyes of the volunteers in it who articulate the benefits of the scheme for themselves and the larger community and discuss challenges to this practice of agricultural production and food sharing.

2.2. The Importance of AFNs for the local Community

There are a number of studies that have looked at the social importance of CSAs. Wells and Gradwell (2001) described a CSA in Iowa as a foundation of ‘care practice’ in the local community. Cox et al. (2008) researched EarthShare, one of the longest running CSAs in Britain and found that communication within a CSA was very important and interactions within the CSA were responsible for raising people’s awareness of climate issues and for sharing knowledge about environmental campaigns. Thus, the CSA can be important ground for sowing ‘the seeds’ for further involvement in community issues. Using a survey of shareholders and interviews with the farming team, Feagan and Henderson (2009) showed that investors in the Devons Acres CSA were highly ambivalent of their role and involvement in the CSA with the focus of the members on learning activities rather than supporting the farmers in their food production. Yet, members professed high degrees of involvement with the project which strengthened

over time as they learnt more about the CSA and they could appreciate more its impact on the local community.

Not all studies see the role of CSAs as positive. Du Puis and Goodman (2005) argue that unexamined 'localism' can prevent CSAs from realising their ambitious agendas – as CSAs are neither inherently radical, nor inherently transformational for the local community and a lot of effort needs to be spent alongside growing to ensure that community building happens. The optimistic vision might never be realized if community practices are limited to a small group of selected individuals (Hinrichs, 2000), and low-income growers might never feel secure enough to ensure food security for others (Guthman et al., 2006). Thus, CSAs run the risk of becoming preoccupied with "middle-class issues" (Goodman et al., 2012) for a limited group of involved investors. The issue of selection echoes concerns in the general literature on trust and organizational involvement. When it comes to trust and associational involvement, McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2014) argue that formal ties, social ties within voluntary organizations create trust in specific people – other members of the organization who can be quite similar socially, ethnically and culturally – rather than trust in a generalized other. Similar sentiments are expressed in Uslaner (2002) and Uslaner and Brown (2005) who are sceptical that generalized trust will be positively influenced by civic and organizational involvement. Thus, the main reason why more open and civic-minded people are associationally involved is "self-selection, not the magical *rainmaker* powers of associational life. Simply put, 'good neighbours make good fences' (Uslaner, 2002: pp.123)". Selection also questions whether there are positive long-term benefits to associational involvement that translate to society at large over time (Stolle, 2001).

2.3. Food Insecurity and Local Responses to the COVID 19 Pandemic

By deciding to donate the produce in its entirety to a variety of community food hubs in the first two growing seasons, CoFarm has become actively involved in local efforts to tackle food insecurity. In recent years, a proliferation of foodbanks has been witnessed which have added to the landscape of voluntary organizations in Britain (Bazerghi et al., 2016, Cloke et al., 2017, O'Hara, 2015). Whereas soup kitchens have existed for quite some time, the rise of food banks can be traced to the period after the economic crises in 2008. For example, the Trussell Trust, a Christian social action charity and a non-governmental organisation that coordinates the network of community-run (foodbank) franchises in the United Kingdom reports a multi-fold

increase in the need for food parcels: in 2009-10 Trussell Trust food banks were operating in 29 local authorities across the UK; by 2013-14, the number had risen to 251 (Trust, 2014). Such voluntary organizations have become vital to efforts of sustaining the local communities and alleviating poverty that frequently surpass the commitment of local or national governments to a destitute area (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017, Loopstra et al., 2015).

Loopstra et al. (2018) showed that the use of food banks is higher in more deprived local authorities and authorities with higher rates of disability and lone parenthood. Loopstra et al. (2015) furthermore ascertained that the increased use of foodbanks is the result of economic sanctioning levied on the unemployed and austerity rather than food banks creating their own demand. Lambie-Mumford (2013) studied the emergency intervention model of the Trussell Trust Foodbank. At the centre of the model is indeed the local community – food is donated by local people, collected through neighbourhood churches, schools and supermarkets, stored locally and distributed to the most vulnerable within the community. Respondents in this study described the impact of cuts to local organizations and services thus: “because of the local government cuts, we’ve faced very substantial reductions in our funding, so the way that we used to, erm, what we used to do was work a different scheme, er, which was funded through our, through grant funding that we had previously, so we were in a position where we were stuck, financially, we were trying to think of creative ways in which we could continue to support families and that was the basis on which I thought we would give this [Foodbank] a try (Lambie-Mumford, 2013: pp.81)”.

Research suggests that long-term analysis of the impact of austerity on social indicators is still very much needed (Lupton and Fitzgerald, 2015). Looking at local voluntary organizations can be important as these have found themselves increasingly responsible for service provision especially in areas facing considerable and pervasive cuts (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Food banks do not provide access to fresh green produce and rely on long shelf-life items. The absence of green produce in deprived areas is thus notable (Purdam et al., 2016). Research on food insecurity during the pandemic indicates that whole systems food approach is much needed at the local level to ensure both effective mitigation of extreme circumstances and food resilience over time (Gordon et al., 2022). An adequately resourced CoFarm model has the potential to ensure such a response.

2.4. Introducing CoFarm

Co-farming aims to deliver environmental stability and improved nutritional public health, whilst encouraging citizen engagement and tackling food insecurity. The CoFarm Foundation, a registered charity, was established on World Food Day in 2019 to develop 'sustainable, community-based agroecological farming' that can be scaled nationally (Foundation, 2019). The 7-acre pilot site of the Foundation is located in Abbey, the most deprived ward of Cambridge city, where life expectancy is 10 years lower than in more affluent wards, and where pre-pandemic levels of food insecurity were already high. Co-farming (see Figure 1) puts local volunteers at the core of the farming process, making them responsible for the co-design and co-creation of the farm and its produce; thus, aiming to optimise social, environmental and economic outcomes for the local community (Foundation, 2019). During the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, CoFarm Cambridge has worked with the local authority, the Cambridge Sustainable Food Partnership, and local community-based organisations (e.g., Abbey People) to co-create a new system of food distribution through community food hubs which ensures that the most vulnerable have access to fresh and nutritious produce. In 2020 and 2021, CoFarm donated its entire harvest (over 12 tonnes of organically produced fruit and vegetables valued at over £52,000) to 8 community food hubs in Cambridge city, and in is committed to donating 75% of the harvest in its third season, which will be roughly equivalent to the output in the second season (around 8 tonnes).



Figure 1. Co-farming promotes healthy ecosystems, close-knit communities, nutritious diets, and the local circular economy (CoFarm Foundation).

The positioning of CoFarm within the most deprived ward in Cambridge, Abbey, and next to the East Barnwell estate, and its active efforts with local NGOs to engage the community have the potential to change and diversify the membership base over time (this was noted by several of the volunteers in the interviews we carried out). Unlike CSAs in which the harvest gets distributed to local investors, the CoFarm

Foundation has adopted an alternative approach during the time of the fieldwork, and in the first two harvest seasons has donated the entire produce to eight community food hubs in Cambridge. The community food hubs approach food insecurity in a different way to food banks. Research indicates that the use of food banks is associated with stigma (Purdam et al., 2016). In contrast, food hubs are set up to distribute healthy and green produce rather than long shelf-life food in the local community (albeit with the use of a traffic system that aims to recognize those most in need), and the food hub organizers argue that these have the potential to reach a wider net of beneficiaries (Food, 2021). CoFarm is part of the Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance and the CoFarm Foundation's Founder and Trustees made the decision to donate the entire harvest to a network of community food hubs which were established in response to the pandemic by the Alliance. This can be seen as a quick and effective response to the pandemic although in the long term, the management of CoFarm has plans to incrementally increase the proportion of food which goes to the volunteer co-farmers directly to bridge the divide between what are perceived to be two different sets of primary beneficiaries – the volunteer co-farmers and the community food hub users (see section 4.8 for the interviews with CoFarm stakeholders.) Unlike food banks, no referral is needed. Furthermore, as co-farming seeks to involve all members of the community in all parts of the process, the stigma involved in using food distribution centres may diminish as members of the community get involved with all parts of the growing process. The interviews with CoFarm volunteers offer an important insight into how they see the distinction between food banks and food hubs.

III. Methodological Approach

The fieldwork followed the growing cycle and took place primarily throughout the autumn of 2020 (when 5 interviews with stakeholders were conducted) and in the summer and autumn of 2021 (interviews with 16 volunteers and 4 additional interviews with stakeholders and food hub coordinators). In January 2022, the fieldwork continued with interviews with food hub beneficiaries (10 have been collected so far) and are currently being analysed. This report focuses on the 25 interviews with CoFarm volunteers and stakeholders.

We examined a variety of possible individual and contextual factors that might be influencing the decision to volunteer with CoFarm. We consider that the multi-layered nature of individual decision making is best captured by qualitative methods. The interview questionnaires have been developed to allow the volunteers to give us an idea of the range of motivations they bring to cofarming, what they see as its main

benefit or experienced challenges. We expected that apart from some of the main themes included in the design, other themes might emerge from the complex interplay in the life experiences of CoFarm volunteers, their individual agency, and the structural opportunities faced.

Participants in the study were recruited in several ways. In terms of the volunteers, we asked CoFarm to circulate a call for study participants in their newsletter. 5 participants approached us in this way. The principal investigator, Dr. Neli Demireva also visited CoFarm in July 2021 and 10 further participants were recruited primarily from the volunteers working on the farm during this visit. An email was sent about the study to the stakeholders in the project and 9 interviewees at different levels in their respective organizations were recruited. Much attention was devoted to the ethics of the research project. Ethical approval was granted before the start of fieldwork. All interviewees were informed about the project, its aims, methods for analysis and presentation of the results, and then asked to sign a consent form. They could withdraw from the interview at any point, and their personal details were kept private. When analysing the data, acronyms were used and specific biographic detail that could allow for identification was removed (such as the names of localities or particular institutions in which the volunteers had involvement).

Many volunteers and stakeholders expressed an initial interest in the study, however, scheduling the interviews was difficult as both interviewees and the research team adapted to the ongoing pandemic. Several interviewees postponed the interviews but came back to the interviewing team with new suggested dates. In two cases the interviews had to be interrupted because of changed commitments and re-arranged for another date. All 25 interviews in this report were carried by zoom. These were carried by the PI of the project, Neli Demireva and Adam Marshall, a research assistant on the project. Further 10 interviews with food hubs were collected by Nicolae Radulescu also a research assistant on the project. These were in depth interviews that ranged between 45 mins with the majority usually lasting between 60 to 90 mins. They were conducted at a time of convenience for the interviewee. Once started, no interviewee decided to withdraw from the conversation.

IV. Findings

4.1. Composition of the CoFarm Volunteer Group

The volunteers with CoFarm that agreed to be interviewed for this project identified primarily as middle class, and in terms of educational credentials, all interviewees had a university degree either at undergraduate or graduate level (they may not be representative of the broader pool of volunteers on the farm; rather, the interviews focus on a highly-educated and engaged group). Although more than 150 potential volunteers came to the initial consultation that CoFarm carried out in 2019 from a variety of backgrounds, the interviewed volunteers were primarily white British. 80% of the volunteer interviews were with women. When asked to reflect on the other volunteers they have met during the sessions on the farm, many interviewees remarked that they felt they met other people like themselves, and they particularly enjoyed interacting with like-minded volunteers actively interested in environmental issues. The volunteer pool was seen to reflect the ethnic composition of Cambridge in general and the huge turnover in the city and its neighbouring areas. Nevertheless, several interviewees mentioned the unique geographical position of CoFarm and how it has the potential over time to change the volunteer pool. Thus, on one side of the farm, there is the Mill Road area, seen as having “lots of kind of lefty, social, arty kind of connotations” while on the other side, “big pretty deprived council social housing area”. Currently, the volunteers believed CoFarm attracts more volunteers from the first pool rather than the latter, but many expressed the view that this will change with concerted action and the report discusses some of their suggestions in the section on widening participation. At the same time, interviewees, the management team and our observations indicated there was substantial mixing along age lines –lots of students volunteer with the farm as well as a large number of older volunteers who have either retired or were close to retirement.

There was a range of volunteer experience with CoFarm among our interviewees. Some have only volunteered for a couple of sessions while the majority have volunteered on and off for a couple of months in both growing seasons. We also interviewed two volunteers with experience of volunteering every week. In general, the interviews with the established volunteers were the longest but all volunteers viewed their experience as positive and contributed to a lively discussion of their motivations for cofarming.

4.2. Individual Orientations and Motivations behind CoFarm Volunteering

This section explores the main motivations of CoFarm volunteers. Some of the volunteers interviewed had their own allotments and spoke of a keen interest in environmental issues. A smaller number either reported that they hold or have held a position in the horticultural sector; for example, in local community supported agricultural initiatives, one has attempted to start their own farming initiative and several have been involved with a community garden. Yet, as one volunteer expressed it, being on the CoFarm site, “was like nothing else in Cambridge” and allowed for “gardening and growing..., keen to learn more, and especially to do so in a community-oriented way”. In many cases, there was a definitive alignment between the goals of the scheme and those of the volunteers. Several interviewees were very knowledgeable about issues in relation to sustainability and the state of the local food sector in the UK and would tell the interviewers in details about issues they had encountered.

Covid19 was seen as a transformational moment for the farm. As one interviewee said,

And I think also lock down had a big impact. I mean, yeah, the volunteering sessions kind of started in the middle of the first lockdown when everything was so intense, and it was just so nice to see some other people and get outside. And yeah, I think those were my main motivations, and also just the fact that pretty quickly, they decided they were going to donate all the produce to food banks and stuff. Which yeah, just felt like a really important thing to do. I mean anyway, but especially in the sort of Covid lockdown times.

Volunteers highlighted that one of the most important aspects of volunteering with CoFarm was the donation of the produce to a variety of different beneficiaries through the food hubs. Many listed this community aspect as their main motivation for cofarming. Interviewees did not see a distinction between cofarmers on the site and food hub beneficiaries – both groups benefited from the project in their own way, and yet an interviewee told us, she still wonders what the food hub beneficiaries think of the project,

Well, the thing is, I don't think they're separate groups, because I think the volunteers hugely benefit from it. So, I think the volunteers are beneficiaries, and I don't know what the people who get the food think about it, to be honest. I have no idea. I don't know if they think, you know, 'I don't want this organic courgette. I'd rather have four tins of baked beans', or, you know, 'Who are these do-gooders thinking they can help me?' I just don't know. I kind of hope that they might benefit from it, but I don't know.

Thus, for many of the volunteers we interviewed the decision for the produce to be donated to food hubs not only did not deter them from the activity but increased their commitment to cofarming – they felt they were doing something important and contributed to the local community in a time of crisis.

For some volunteers cofarming was an important form of exercise, perhaps the only form of exercise they had especially during the pandemic. An interviewee mentioned that they have been “struggling a bit with mental health, and ...wanted to go out and do something outside and social” during the Covid19 emergency and the idea of the farm and its social aspect really appealed to them. Cofarming seemed a perfect way to address mental health issues and offered an opportunity to our volunteer respondents to learn “about tangible stuff that's as important as food growing”.

For the really engaged with local community environmental and food insecurity issues, all the roads were leading to CoFarm. For example, one interviewee mentioned that at a certain point, she saw announcements about CoFarm on Facebook, then in a work context as part of a group focusing on food insecurity “someone suggested we could have a group work visit to the CoFarm, because they thought it would be interesting for people”, and finally close family members also had started to volunteer with a similar project (in fact a CSA) which was described to the interviewee as a very rewarding experience, so at a certain moment, it felt like CoFarm information was coming from a “variety of different people at the same time” and it was “impossible” not to get involved or at least enquire after this initiative.

One interviewee described Cambridge as a very “foodie area” and situated the CoFarm organic produce in a broader good food movement. This was a sentiment echoed in some of the interviews with stakeholders – that ultimately, cofarming will lead to recourse to more nutritious produce for a group of people with broad spectrum of circumstances (for more information, see section 4.8 of this report).

Many volunteers believed that the two horticulturalists that assisted in the development of the farm had played a huge role and were responsible for the high levels of volunteering observed,

The gardeners there, make it what it is, because they're the people that everyone interacts with, and they're so committed and enthusiastic and welcoming as well. I mean, they do a great job of encouraging volunteers and getting the best out of people, I would say. And they've done a great job of setting up this wonderful market garden, in what seems like virtually no time, and producing four and a half tons of produce. It's quite surprising and quite extraordinary. And on what wasn't that brilliant land, really. I'm sure they'll get it to be better as time goes on, but they've done wonders with it as it is. They're very skilled, so I've got a lot of admiration for them, and I think the other volunteers have to.

Volunteers were frequently delighted that they could be part of an initiative in which they meet like-minded people: "so yeah, having a community where there's that quite embodied, close to nature stuff to do with other people, seemed a good idea"; "ideologically as well, it really chimes with my politics". In some cases, the idea of co-farming provided re-assurance in times when it felt "there's been a big decline in being a member of something these days". That being involved with CoFarm was too good an opportunity to be missed was a sentiment expressed in many interviews: "it was too good to be true like is there seriously a farm with the exact same ideals, as what I've been looking for 10 minutes down the road".

At the same time, many interviewees reported that although natural bonds were easy to form and conversations flowed easily, there were lots of other volunteers they were "friendly with" but hardly "socialized with outside that setting". Only one interviewee confirmed that they socialize with people from CoFarm in other settings, however another added that "I feel the people I met there are people that I will keep as friends forever". Volunteer interviewees would often remark that everything could change with restrictions lifting and opportunities for "nice fireside parties, when it's a bit more allowed"; however, for many "having nice, interesting people to talk to has been enough".

4.3. The organization of the volunteer process

Volunteers reported that they heard about Cofarm through social media. In one case, the information was received through a leaflet of the Green party. As the start of the farming season for CoFarm and the general activities coincided with the Covid19 pandemic, the CoFarm management designed and operated a strict policy of releasing slots for the farming sessions online for which volunteers could sign up in advance. Up to five open co-farming sessions would be available for booking each week, depending

upon the amount of volunteer input needed throughout the season. Up to 15 volunteers could be on the farm site at any point in time which was viewed by some of the volunteers as “a small number for a site of about 8 acres”. The stringency of the system frequently came up into the volunteers’ interviews although interviewees reported that the existing restrictions followed government pandemic guidelines and acknowledged that the protocols were important for ensuring their safety during the pandemic. A couple of interviewees that volunteered only for a handful of sessions with CoFarm reported that they will go on the website, and “whenever they would check”, “there hasn’t been any [spaces] free”. In the second season with CoFarm, volunteers reported that it was much harder to get a slot even though the number of available slots doubled with included afternoon and morning sessions because many more people have become interested in the project. Volunteers saw this “as a nice problem to have” for CoFarm highlighting that demand was high. Several volunteers remarked that some tasks took a lot more time than if there weren’t any restrictions on numbers, such as for example the weeding. The control of numbers and strict slot policy also allowed for volunteer selection to be controlled- thus, many of the volunteers reported that they did not just show up with friends or their partners, which they may have done in the past when it came to voluntary organizational activity and in reality were more likely to meet “strangers” on the farm site. Thus, interviewees reported that they have met people that “they would not have met otherwise”. This has important implications in terms of the ‘rainmaker’ opportunities for social connectedness at CoFarm, and for cofarming to take place among a broader group of people.

Many volunteers appreciated that there were two experienced horticulturalists on site who remembered the names of volunteers and were frequently described as passionate, very friendly and very engaged, great teachers that share their “knowledge in a way that is not patronizing”. For many this made the experience of cofarming categorically different from working on their own allotment (although similarities such as involvement in food production and being outside were acknowledged as well). The volunteers believed that the paid horticulturalists were similar to them in that they were not “just looking for a lucrative job to earn loads of money” but they are “contributing something wider” and would “want something nourishing”. As one interviewee described the difference between cofarming and being on their allotment,

It's different, because [the two horticulturalists] are in charge, and they decide what goes in, what is being grown and where it will go. So, in a way, it's nice to just turn up and kind of say, 'What you want me to do?' That kind of decision making is taken out

of my hands, whereas on our own allotment, you worry, overly, about where you're going to place things, or how things are doing, but I guess there is a bit--I don't have to make those decisions. And also, knowing that, if I don't go the following week, then there's a lot of other volunteers who are going to take my place. Whereas, if I don't go to the allotment, and different plants need watering and it's been really sunny, they die, if I don't go. So, it's a different way of looking at it. Also, because it's a bigger scale--I'm gonna mention the scything again. I never imagined, I would learn how to scythe, so you to pick up new skills that probably, otherwise, you wouldn't pick up. Like planting apple trees or something. I wouldn't be able to do that at the allotment. Or using a rotavator. I just don't have this equipment. So yeah, there are new things to learn that kind of pushes you a bit more, I guess.

4.4 Benefits of Co-Farming, Community building and community engagement

For many volunteer interviewees mental health benefits were the main attraction to cofarming. Being outside and socializing with a community were mentioned in all interviews. Volunteers talked about having a similar experience to being on their allotment - "outside", "hearing the sound of nature" - while at the same time having the opportunity to learn new skills at CoFarm. A few even felt they built sufficient expertise and could realistically see a career in horticulture for themselves especially at a time "when many people are stuck inside". They felt "amazingly lucky" that they knew this place where they "can be outside", and simultaneously embraced the opportunity to have all their questions answered "patiently" by the two horticulturalists. Interviewees described this as an empowering experience. Being on the site, for some as often as once a month and for others several times a week allowed volunteers "to feel like you're part of a bigger project and that you're valued in some way". Furthermore, they felt they were actively making "a positive change to something, even if it's just growing some vegetables in the ground". A volunteer said that being at the farm helped dealing with the Covid anxiety of socializing again "in pubs and dealing with other people". Here are the experiences of three different interviewees in further detail,

I think that, I mean just the sort of mental health benefits of being outside and having your hands in the soil, working with plants and seeing all the insects and all those sorts of things has been great. And also, just getting to meet some new people has been really nice. And you know, I've definitely made friends out of it, like, you know, we've met up and socialized outside of the CoFarm environment and things like that. And

yeah, just feeling like I'm kind of working towards something that's like really in line with my values and my sort of passion for land justice and things like that. But, yeah, I think the sort of mental health benefits have been a big one. And also, sometimes we get some free food, which is nice [laughs].

It's been wonderful to do things outside. I love being outside, and it's just another chance to get outside and do something positive with people. I love working in a team, so I enjoy being part of a group doing stuff, very much. And I think I've benefited from doing the different aspects of the work.

I've found it very therapeutic in some ways. For example, when it restarted this spring, I was quite depressed. I was quite anxious, and I went a few times by myself, and it was almost a matter of like having--I didn't want to get out of bed or to talk to anyone, but just being there and being outside, and having your hands in the soil, and being able to just pass the time of day with people, it really, it really helped for those 3 or 4 weeks.

Another volunteer described the benefit of cofarming as an activity that connects people with nature. The growing literature on social prescribing also highlights this important aspect of outdoor activities (Kilgarriff-Foster and O'Cathain, 2015, Chatterjee et al., 2018, Drinkwater et al., 2019):

I guess my realisation that growing food is a very enjoyable activity, and it's very good for people's physical and mental health. And yeah, I think it's a great idea in terms of fostering community spirit and getting people involved in community activities that are enjoyable. So yeah, generally good all-around. But it is quite interesting to talk to them and see what are the different backgrounds they come from, and it's really nice to just meet people with a mutual interest and also to tap into the knowledge of the two guys running the project [the two horticulturalists]. Yeah, they were super knowledgeable on a lot of, especially in relation to chemical free organic means of pest control, or like certain types of flowers or plants that are good at keeping certain types of pests away from certain types of vegetable...

Meeting people with similar interests was a common theme in many interviews,

One of the big benefits of working on CoFarm is kind of just meeting people. It's a nice way to interact with people, because lots of the kind of volunteers are a similar mindset, I guess. They are generally environmentally conscious, or they are people who grow their own vegetables at home or have an allotment. We have an allotment, for example. Or people who are trying to qualify in horticulture. There's quite a few people who assume qualifications through The Royal Horticultural Society. So, volunteering there

just to kind of gain experience, and it's kind of nice just to--Because with different activities at the CoFarm, you might just be put into loose groups to work on the same thing together, and it's kind of a nice--you can have a chat and just find out about people and there isn't too much pressure on you to entertain. If that makes sense. While you are weeding or harvesting beans or whatever it is, you can just have a chat, and you can find out about people. Everyone's really nice and friendly. Even during the kind of the restrictions with covid, it's been quite nice to meet people.

Many interviewees specifically felt that they have picked practical gardening skills that also allowed them to realize how challenging a farming project is, including organizing the production, the harvesting period and managing the volunteer aspect of the project. Some interviewees reported that they were "literally copying" everything that the experienced horticulturalists were doing, and then implementing this knowledge on their allotment – the spacing of plants was given as an example by two interviewees. Volunteers reported that they saw tangible improvement in their gardening skills as a result of cofarming. For example, one interviewee mentioned that following their CoFarm experience they managed "last summer" to double what they produced on their allotment "and that's just from picking up little tips here and there". Another said that,

Well, I've definitely learned practical gardening skills, that's for sure. Even though I've had my own allotment for basically the same extent that I've been at CoFarm, or slightly longer, and I've kind of just taught myself from the internet. But it's been really helpful to have professional gardeners, like people who are properly trained in horticulture, to sort of teach you the right way to do things or the more traditional way to do things, maybe. So yeah, I have learned a lot in terms of just like literal gardening skills and techniques. And also, I think it's just been really interesting to see the scale of it. Like it's obviously a lot bigger than a garden or an allotment or something like that, so it's been interesting to kind of learn about the volumes of food that can be produced from that space and how much work goes into it all.

For some volunteers, engaging in cofarming meant that they are learning to persevere and practically manage their expectations of the growing process,

You have to just settle down to doing one repetitive job.... It's just that settling into, 'Okay. I'm going to be doing this for hours', and it's that consistency where you have to just settle down into it and become someone who's prepared to do that, rather than the, 'Oh this is boring. I'm not going to do this for more than half an hour, and I want to do something else', you know.

One interviewee put the knowledge of cofarming as very important in the context of major challenges such as Brexit or the climate crisis,

But I remember one of the times that I went on the CoFarm somebody was saying that when the Brexit deal happened, he thought there'd be some times, where the supermarkets will really struggle to have fresh produce like lettuce on the shelves, and it really reminded me of how important it is to have not just the knowledge, but the means to be able to grow stuff locally, which I think as climate change hits, we're going to have to think quite seriously about food resilience, and I think CoFarm's an important part of collectivising that knowledge.

Many volunteers talked about cofarming in relation to addressing food insecurity locally. Cofarming was seen as putting the stress on "growing food locally, rather than having it in lorries from farms from far away to distribution centres... Far away, wrapped in plastic." Moreover, the high level of determination of volunteers of the project would ensure the success of cofarming,

I've seen masses of determination from [the two horticulturalists and the Founder of CoFarm]. And a lot of the very committed and regular volunteers are incredibly committed. So, I've learned that people really want it and that there's an awful lot of determination to make it succeed, and I think that makes me pretty clear that it will succeed. To start with, I was a bit unsure because there were already organic producers around here, and you never know how a community project's going to go, but I've learned that the combination of expertise that [the Founder of CoFarm] brought from his previous life, and the commitment of [the two horticulturalists] and a lot of the other volunteers is huge, and it's a really likely the project will succeed, and also to be able to be generalized to other cities, other places too...

Although the interviewees could not assess scientifically the benefits of cofarming in terms of biodiversity, they often mentioned them. Several volunteers reported that they had been involved and felt proud for transforming the CoFarm site from "unused scrubland", and "acres of just weeds", where people used to walk "their dog on the edge", to "a functioning small-scale farm" – a "much better use of the land" now with "bees and butterflies and ladybirds and things, because bee populations have gone down amazingly". As economic benefits of the project were rarely mentioned, the interviewer was instructed to ask about those too. Volunteers would then say that "thinking in terms of the money generated by a thing is the wrong way to think about... It's a non-profit project, so it's not there to make money for the local economy." Thus, the opportunity for a more "cohesive society" through social interactions was the main

benefit for many interviewees, in which cofarming was one activity among several that would offer an opportunity for local people to come together and solve a social problem in an increasingly secular society. One interviewee offered this perspective,

I feel something like CoFarm, and community farming in general, and libraries, can also have that hope of being a bit of an anchor institution and a bit of a secular alternative where people can see each other week after week and form more enduring relationships that might be kind of normal if you go to a mosque or something, but there just aren't many secular, regular things that you can attend that aren't--Most of those things in the secular world tend to be quite narrow, and I feel like people who might share lots in common, like being from the same generation, or being mums, or being pensioners together, whereas the CoFarm I think has really managed to build a group of people where different generations and it's town and it's gown and it's--well, I guess it could do better in terms of class. I think that's kind of normal for lots of similar institutions, but it's better in that respect than lots of similar groups happening in Cambridge, and yeah, I definitely have met people I don't think I would have met otherwise.

Several interviewees remarked that CoFarm had introduced something special in their lives because of the way volunteering on the farm, watching the crops grow and harvesting the produce came full circle:

I think my timing was quite unique as when I went, in the winter, for the first time I was involved in planting the broad beans as seedlings, and then when I went last month, they were just ready to harvest, so there was like this full circle of I was the one who actually planted them, and then I came back a few months later and actually saw them, you know, like three feet taller and ready to harvest, and I thought that was really quite a special feeling. And just harvesting and packaging all of the food ready for the trucks to come and deliver them to food hubs. It was a really rewarding feeling that I really enjoyed.

4.5. Access and widening participation

Many interviewees mentioned that whereas they see a nice mix of people in terms of age and gender on the CoFarm site (one interviewee with a small child felt she much rather would engage in cofarming activities rather than activities for other young mothers), they felt much more can be done about attracting people that belong to different ethnic groups or to ensure greater mixing in terms of socio-economic

backgrounds. The positive effect of voluntary involvement is often attributed to exposure and association with diverse others (Glanville et al., 2009, Farkas and Lindberg, 2015, Stolle, 2001). Evidence that membership can be homogenous across individual and socio-economic dimensions such as education, age or race essentially indicates low odds of inter-group contact (Uslaner, 2002). Yet, organizations can be homogeneous on one dimension such as age but heterogeneous on others such as gender (Putnam 2000); and membership in multiple associations matters (Wollebaek and Selle, 2002) which was visible on the CoFarm site. Thus, although the experience of mixing with people with similar mindsets was very pleasant, the experience of “tripping over people with PhDs” on the CoFarm site was seen as something that needs addressing. Another interviewee said,

Like it's almost become a bit of a cliché. Like instead of just asking people, 'Oh, what are you do?' Or something like that, when you're talking to them people? Well, some people have definitely asked like, 'so what's your PhD in?' Or, 'So, what sort of research do you do?' or something like that? Because, it's become so much of a cliché that like, people they are generally doing like PhDs at Cambridge University. Yeah, so when someone just asked me that question--I mean, yes, I'm not doing a PhD at Cambridge University, but I am a researcher and it's not a million miles away. So yeah, I think that that kind of hit me at one point. I was like, 'Wow.' That just shows you the typical answer to that question at CoFarm.

Some interviewees attributed this to Cambridge being a very “unequal and divided city in which you have the university on one hand and the housing estates on the other”, with the two worlds, “never mixing”. Yet, volunteers saw the geographical position of the farm near the most deprived areas of the city as an active opportunity for this to change in the future as the location near the Barnwell estate has “real potential to enable people to have something really positive in their lives”. Such change will demand a concerted effort and will take time (for example, few interviewees knew volunteers involved both in the farm and the food hubs either as volunteers or beneficiaries).

Interviewees however outlined several possible courses of action for CoFarm in terms of widening participation (and some of these were echoed in the stakeholder interviews as described in section 4.8). Whereas other community activities were seen as not very forthcoming as they required a great degree of involvement from the start, the “dip in and out” flexibility of cofarming as currently operated and the no “forcing people to come every week and pay a fee” were seen as positives that over time will

introduce people to the naturally meditative aspect of cofarming and its benefits. Ultimately, cofarming was thought to be appealing to a wide variety of people because the farming site is “a place where even if you don't feel very confident or you're not really articulate that it's okay for you”. Weeding and harvesting were pointed out as practices where volunteers believed everybody could join in. One volunteer drew parallels with introspective church activities. Another described cofarming in this way,

And that's why I think that CoFarm, in general, is really excellent in that, because I think other leisure voluntary activity stuff lays quite a lot of emphasis on talking, and I would be comfortable with that, I'm chatty and articulate, but I think there's definitely a cohort of people, and I think class comes into it, but also like whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, who don't want to feel pressure to say clever things or witty things or whatever, and the CoFarm really feels like a space where you don't have to talk, and I think that's quite rare in community life. That feels really important. Or not talk. Yeah, I think, in general, industrial societies are not very good at providing spaces for people to be companionable but quiet. Like if you just think about like in pre-industrial societies, like a lot of the time you might have been winding wool or podding peas or hammering fence posts. You would have been doing it with other people, but you wouldn't have had to have been chatty, but I think because of automation or whatever, there's less of that kind of space to just be around other people, but not to feel that you have to talk.

One interviewee suggested that volunteers could be actively engaged in the process of widening participation and use their organizing experiences with other communities,

So, who are the people who live within half a mile of CoFarm. I would love to do some door knocking and invite them in, because when like a nice-minded person that you felt comfortable with on the doorstep has invited you, and you know that they'll be there to smile at you, and make you feel welcome, and there'll be at least one person you recognise. It makes it so much easier to step into a new space.

Volunteers were well aware that the task of widening participation is not going to be easy and yet it was perceived as essential, now that CoFarm is well-established and the project is becoming highly popular. There was a danger otherwise CoFarm will become a “white middle class project” not that different from other sustainability projects in the area. One volunteer thought that particular attention should be paid to the project catering to the needs of the wider community and making sure that people from a variety of different backgrounds “can feel at home” on the CoFarm site,

Well, you have to reach out. You have to make connections with people where they are, and the relationship's got to come before anything else. So, you know, I think when CoFarm has the time and the energy, there's real potential to engage with community in a variety of ways, but not necessarily directly on the farm to start with, but lead to that, but just to make a relationship first. But how exactly it could happen? I haven't got any clear idea. I think [the Founder of CoFarm] is going about it the right way, connecting with the local community worker, and I'm sure I'm sure opportunities will come out of that. But I also think there's something about vegetables and organic vegetables. It's not what everyone wants to eat, and I know that they've been donating all their food, an amazing amount, like four and a half tons I think it was, last year, to the food hubs because of covid and people really experiencing food poverty. But not all of that veg was used. There were things that people didn't even recognize, you know, like celeriac. People didn't know what to do with it. You know, there's a kind of cultural barrier. I think one way would be, there's quite a large Asian population on this big council estate, as far as I'm aware. One way would be to grow things that they use that they need for their cuisine. I think that would be a really good way to go, so great things like coriander and fenugreek, at scale, possibly might be a way in, and then engage them to help come and help look after them. I think that would speak to that part of the community, but as far as veg growing generally goes. I mean it might just be seen by people who are really kind of into the health aspects of good organic veg, or are maybe looking for a job and maybe feeling pretty down, and it's really tough times anyway, are they going to go work on a farm for nothing as a volunteer to grow something they don't really relate to? I mean there's gonna have to be a lot of thought about how to get over that, if people are really going to engage across the board.

The interviews with the beneficiaries of the produce will shed further light on these issues. Another interviewee worried that the CoFarm project,

Could be perceived as a thing for people who have the time and the money to be able to devote to volunteer their time to a project like that? I think that could be off-putting to people. I don't know. I'm trying to imagine how people might perceive it. A load of well-off do-gooders, maybe? I don't know how it might be perceived by people.

One interviewee said that there is a "negative cultural perception of people who are interested in environmental issues or maybe are vegan or vegetarian", and their concerns are seen "as only appealing to a very narrow section of society". Yet, this volunteer was highly aware that in their words, there is an important difference between those that work Monday to Friday and "can afford to do cofarming on the weekend", and people who "would have jobs that would not allow them to do that" or

that they had “no choice”. Economic concerns were mentioned by several volunteers who believed these were a barrier to the widening of participation. One volunteer insisted that this issue can be addressed by providing more paid positions than just the two professional horticulturists – feeling that a lack of additional paid posts could jeopardize the existence of the project,

I would just like there to be many more like paid positions in this sort of work, and that it shouldn't be assumed that, 'Oh, you know people will just will run this CoFarm through volunteers solely. Like otherwise, we won't exist as an organisation', basically. I wish there was just more--not that volunteering is like completely bad. It's fine if you're getting some sort of mental health benefit or some people like to volunteer, but I just think there's just this implicit assumption that, 'Oh well, we'll just get volunteers to do all this hard agricultural labour, and that's fine and that's the sort of food system that we want when I think agricultural labour should just be better valued, and lots more people should be paid for their labour, basically. Because otherwise, even if it's environmentally sustainable, it's not economically sustainable, and it's not open and fair to most people.

Horticultural certificates and formalized learning opportunities was mentioned by another interviewee as a possibility for encouraging people from a variety of backgrounds to be involved alongside additional paid or subsidized positions. CoFarm's initial community consultation in 2019 identified that there was significant appetite for informal learning to be accredited, with 58% of participants saying they'd be interested in being accredited (CoFarm, 2019).

Or even if it's not a job, maybe do like educational courses or something that people are subsidised to do. Like there's got to be more routes into it for people who can't just volunteer their free time. You know, for a day or for more week, I think you would get more people from a broader range of backgrounds able to participate in it if there were more paid or subsidised opportunities to get involved. So that would be the number one thing.

A volunteer thought it will be particularly good to target schools and in particular to highlight the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere on the farm,

It may be a good idea to post clips of little mini-interviews or quotes from some of the volunteers, just to convey the very relaxed and open and welcoming environment that prevails there.

Even interviewees that did not have a particularly great time initially (and did not stay long during their first session), kept going and felt that their experience has improved over time. For example, one interviewee felt at first like a “spare part”, and after the main growing activity finished worries that they could not join a group of other volunteers casually talking but they attributed this to anxiety and were certain that over time “they might get to the point to be able to relax with everybody else”.

4.6. Produce and Food Hubs

Among the 16 interviewed volunteers none could draw a distinction between food hubs and food banks when asked to describe the organizations which received the CoFarm produce and all expressed confusion about the terms. Even when prompted about a difference, the volunteers struggled to identify a distinction, and many thought that what is “called, a food hub in Cambridge, is just another term for what might be called a food bank anywhere else”. Some interviewees said that they believe that the food hubs are “more of a foodie basis”, that they are not “just handing tins” and that food banks have by comparison “been there for a while”. Many reported the food hubs were run by churches and different community centres. An interviewee believed that in the food hub there will be “some sort of cooked food and cook meals” but they were not certain about specific elements. A volunteer said that the local food banks are organized by the Tussell Trust whereas the food hubs that received the CoFarm produce were organized by Cambridge Sustainable Food. Rarely, the interviewees had been to the food hubs. Only one interviewee had done some volunteer food drops with the food hub in their neighbourhood, and recollected people in the local allotment scheme organizing food drops at the same food hub too. Yet, several volunteers mentioned how they got excited and proud when at 7pm during the harvest the produce was picked up to be distributed in the food hubs.

Here are the perspectives of two volunteers on the difference between food hubs and food banks (or what they believe is the lack of such),

They require a referral, maybe. I'm not sure if you can just go along, but I'm only guessing, because I've not been involved. And the food hubs were possibly set up in response to covid, but I don't know.

I don't know what the difference is to be honest. I don't know if it's just a bit more of a different name for the same principle.

Many volunteers had only second-hand impressions of the food hubs and worried that beneficiaries might not find the organic produce of CoFarm appealing,

It's definitely second hand this. But that people didn't always recognise what to do with the veg, necessarily, that we donated. So, celeriac, which does look quite weird when you first see one, but I've had to learn what to do with that. It's just a root veg. I can imagine that happening, yeah. I mean, especially if supermarkets. If people have only ever eaten out of supermarkets, and quite often people buy those packets where everything's cut up for them. And quite a lot of organic veg coming out of the ground, as it does, is not necessarily that clean. It needs washing, peeling and chopping. People see that as work. It's not necessarily what they've been brought up to or ever thought about doing. So, they don't really see that as food, you know. That's a possibility.

This project also conducted 9 interviews with beneficiaries of the food hub and 3 with food hub volunteers and organizers. The initial analysis shows that the interviewed beneficiaries appreciated the organic food produced on the CoFarm site. It is important to note that several volunteer interviewees corrected us when it came to making a distinction between volunteers and beneficiaries of the project and as one put it "the volunteers hugely benefit from" the cofarming experience and in this way "the volunteers are beneficiaries" (we have tried to draw a distinction in the interview guides between groups that benefit from cofarming in different ways - volunteers on the site and beneficiaries of the produce through the food hubs).

4.7. The future of CoFarm as a community project

The interviewed volunteers thought that the CoFarm project is an important local initiative and that it opened their eyes to what is possible in terms of agroecology on a local level. However, many were unsure whether cofarming could become an alternative food model that can supplant dominant models of food production rather than exist on the side lines. They thought such a system reversal would be challenging because of the "supermarket kind of culture" and "you can't force people to grow potatoes in their back garden if they don't want to". The task of "feeding 70 million" people in a sustainable cofarming way appeared to be "a mammoth" on to an interviewee - an incredibly hard to achieve at that when "every town has a gigantic Sainsbury's, and a Liddle, and a Waitrose, and a Tesco, and a Morrison's. You'd have

to reverse that, and there's too much money behind it" and because "it's convenient for people to have a giant supermarket within half a mile of your house". Another interviewee suggested that unless raising sustainable food is done through predominantly paid labour, there will be little chance of challenging the established food systems because:

The Labour that is needed for CoFarm is all volunteer-led and the dominant food system relies on paid people, who can devote whole days, on crappy wages, but you know, whole days to picking, and, obviously, with all of the extra inputs that you get from fertilisers and pesticides and petrochemicals that go in your tractor. Yeah, if you're talking about actually feeding people enough food, it's a really long stretch to replace the dominant food system.

Importantly, several interviewees reported that after their cofarming experience they had become more engaged with their local areas and they had started to think about the need of having alternative food network sites embedded in housing projects, or about growing food in sustainable way or even engaging in food sustainability activism. Here are the perspectives of 3 interviewees,

There should be a requirement where if you're going to build a thousand houses, you have to provide this square acreage of allotments, or a CoFarm, or however it's organised, because I think if you look at it from a kind of social--I guess, because I've found cofarming and growing myself to be so beneficial, it's kind of convinced me that it's something that's missing from people's lives. Being able to just get your hands dirty and to grow something. I've found such immense satisfaction from it. And if you think about the Mental Health crisis. There's so many depressed and anxious people on medication, and I think rather than being medicated, you need some kind of social outdoor activity, like going to a CoFarm or an allotment, would just make people's lives better. Yeah, it would provide the option for people, rather than just giving them antidepressants or whatever.

Having been involved with CoFarm in particular, these kinds of projects are on our mind. We often walk past big pieces of land, and we think, 'Oh, they could just have a CoFarm in the middle of this new development, but they don't, because they could stick another block of houses or flats on it. It seems like a bit of a wasted opportunity, because there is lots of kind of--Yeah, just near us, otherwise it would be farming land, I guess, between here and Histon, but they're just going to build a few hundred houses on it instead, which is a bit of a shame, I think.

The public sector still owns land that could be used to do more of this kind of collective farming. I'm reading a great book at the moment called *Who Owns England* about just how mysterious and unknown it is who owns a lot of land. It's a bit geeky, but if there was more transparency with the land registry about who owned which bits of land, especially unused land. There are so many bits of land which are just lying idle. Not even being wildlife havens, just like wasted. I think that could do a huge amount to drive forward more places like CoFarm.

A common theme in the interviews was how unique the CoFarm project is both in the lives of the volunteers and in the lives of people in the wider community, and many praised the founder of the project and the two horticulturalists for their determination. Almost all interviewees expressed concerns however that such a lucky confluence of circumstances could not happen twice – because any other site will be “threatened by the danger of putting housing on it” and because “affordable housing needs are also crucial”. A volunteer worried that “CoFarm doesn't own the land, so, potentially, that's a big downfall if someone decides to build on it, and it gets sold then that's CoFarm gone”. Even if the volunteers perceived the project as stable and scalable, they thought local councils will prioritize housing needs,

I think potentially it's the kind of project that could be replicated on other sites in Cambridge. And I think they would certainly have enough volunteers. There's enough people out there who want to get involved with a project like that to make it sustainable. But any kind of expansion, again, would be reliant on money and cooperation from whoever owns that land.

There was a real sense of despondency in many interviews because when asked to think about the future, several interviewees remarked that the future is already bleak as the current food system in which people are intentionally or unintentionally locked “is broken” but that nothing would be done about it until there is an ecological “disaster”. Several volunteers told the interviewers that any real effort addressing the climate emergency relying on input from local and national government is doomed,

So, I think, ultimately, these things can only change from top-down legislation and motivated government that actually follows through on environmental pledges, and I just think a lot of the time they're kicking the can down the road. You know, saying, 'We'll be carbon neutral by 2050.' That just means we're not going to do anything. The whole cabinet will probably be dead by then, you know. They're making it someone else's problem. I guess I'm not optimistic about that top-down change coming.

An interviewee thought that cofarming had two challenges to overcome, reliance on extremely motivated individuals to make it happen and “local councils being friendly to the idea, or open to the idea, which is not guaranteed”. The structure of the cofarming model was extensively discussed in one of the interviews in which a volunteer perceived the model to be overly dependent upon “super volunteers, who are there basically as much as [the two paid, professional horticulturalists], and as far as I know they're not getting paid and they don't get kind of any of the recognition that [the two paid horticulturalists] do”. This volunteer wondered whether this ultimately “undervalues people’s labour” and would have liked to see a different governance structure that is more community based as a possible step towards addressing the issue that “98.6% of farmers are white and stuff like that. And it's like, if you don't come from a farming background, it's really difficult to get into and things like that”. Overall, most interviewed volunteers thought that the CoFarm project is exceptional in many different ways but that also meant that replication will be particularly difficult and will involve concerted effort.

There were many moments of excitement and optimism in the interviews as well, especially when we asked volunteers to reflect on what CoFarm can specifically do to promote the cofarming model and about individual volunteer efforts. The beautiful CoFarm site was seen as having a clear advantage over other sustainability efforts that were not as “photogenic” and which “depend on the goodwill of national government”,

I think climate breakdown is making a lot of people in different cities and a lot of local authorities, which have declared climate emergency, recognise the importance of local food resilience. And yeah--because it's very photogenic and media friendly, as an idea. I mean, it sounds facile, but the world is full of amazing policy interventions that could boost community, or help the climate, or improve wellbeing, or make food systems more sustainable, but most of them are not photogenic. Like if you're improving the way that subsidies are given out, or pesticides are regulated, or land is registered, you can't do those beautiful ITV segments with smiling people among the chard that's glistening in the dew drops. And also, you can do it from a very bottom-up level. Like you don't depend on the goodwill of national government. We have a national government at the moment that doesn't seem to take climate as seriously as it should be taken, but there are a whole host of local authorities who have either land, or other actors like the church or other landowners, who have the ability to get land, and so I think you can grow a movement without topdown regulation or Parliament or whatever.

The same volunteer told us that effective outreach is crucial for a project like CoFarm (echoing sentiments in the trust literature that for a venture to really have a positive impact on social cohesion one needed not only close associates, relatives and friends to be involved but also neighbours and the broader community) and had several suggestions how this can be organized,

You're always going to have the hardcore people who are like, 'Yeah, I really love compost, and I really love caring for climate change or growing my own carrots, and I'm going to turn out for CoFarm to help them get the land', but if you just work with them that's hard to get enough power, but if you work with those people plus the friends of their neighbours that they might see once a week in church--they don't have to come every time, but just you're able to draw on them like twice a year when it matters for the big moments. [Charity Organization] did really well is we actually worked with the head teacher of the local school, who can then bring when it matters like 60 of his kids to this assembly. Let's work with the imam of this mosque, who can turn out like 50 of his congregants to question the mayor about housing. Let's work with the leader of this sports club, who had built a sports club that's about community and not just about ping pong.

Another volunteer would have loved to see projects that targets specific groups, for example, refugees. A few interviewees were concerned about the two paid horticulturalists and thought that they were overstretching themselves but that in the future as people learn more about cofarming, the effort will even out,

...changing some of the way they run things next year to like split up the labour, a bit more with some of the more well-established volunteers. I think that's a good. That's a good thing for the like longevity at the project because I think the way they run it this year. Probably put too much a lot too much work on them that shoulders. But yeah, no, I want to see it flourish here and you know, spread its seeds. All over the place.

Thus, relying on “supervolunteers” was also an important asset that meant that CoFarm can utilize the knowledge of a variety of players and groups to bring about change. For example, a volunteer told us about a project on an estate of which they were part, currently not running because of Covid19, which involved cooking a meal every two weeks on the estate site and ensuring access to nutritious content for people facing food insecurity.

4.8. Interviews with the Stakeholder Group

The interviews with the stakeholder group also provided interesting and insightful material. 3 of our 9 stakeholder interviewees were men, and apart from one interviewee the rest identified as white British. All had university degrees. In many cases the efforts of the stakeholders focused on practically communicating the role of CoFarm in the local community. The stakeholder interviews revealed some of the practical challenges that the local community was facing. The immediate neighbourhood in which CoFarm was located was described as “lacking access” to fresh fruit, greengrocers had disappeared while the corner shop was good to get “a bag of apples” but little else. Yet, involving people in cofarming could be seen as challenging because Cambridge “is a very divided city” in which “two communities” exist and,

You know, there're so many people where they've never seen you know they don't know what a veggie patch looks like. They don't. They wouldn't know where to begin.

The practical support provided at the farm and in the food hubs can then be considered essential – especially, the sessions at the farm where “somebody could just come along and learn the basics” were thought to appeal to a wide variety of people. In parallel, in the food hub, staff would help beneficiaries “to know what are these vegetables that are here in front of me”. For several of the interviewees, the CoFarm site and food hubs were interconnected because awareness of the food cycle happened through both,

It's about connecting because there's, there's nothing like planting a seed, you know, watering it watching it grow, and then picking that and eating that. And knowing that you saw that whole process and that sort of activity. So I think it's really important then to connect people when they go to the food hub and they see the kale, they go, oh, actually I planted that kale.

Stakeholder interviewees were very optimistic about widening the participation of the community with the CoFarm project and its overall engagement. This could necessitate something as simple as “coming a bit more out into the community” which “will then probably get people going back in return” as cofarming has the potential to “engage people in a really simple way and then go a bit deeper with people just by virtue of them just enjoying themselves and being involved in tackling some of those larger-than-self issues”. One interviewee wondered whether CoFarm could take over the green spaces in the immediate vicinity of the housing estates in Cambridgeshire, “there's quite a lot of space, like there's like small bits of green spaces, especially around some of like the blocks of flats and things which don't really get used too much” which can provide a way of demonstrating to residents the value of the project and involve them in a holistic way.

Many possible benefits of cofarming were mentioned in the interviews and there was clear alignment between how volunteers and beneficiaries viewed the project. One stakeholder interviewee described cofarming as giving an opportunity “to people that don’t have it” to be close to nature apart from getting fresh fruit and vegetables in a context that would not normally offer many such opportunities. One interviewee saw cofarming as a social movement to reclaim left over space that would, “encourage people to use space in a way that’s meaningful rather than just having an ornamental green space, but actually to come together and grow food on it that you can then eat”. Furthermore,

It brings people together with a common shared activity and goal and it’s not competitive and I suppose it could be if you want to grow the biggest turnip... But you know it’s, it’s about just doing something and enjoying space and using it in a way that’s better than you know, just an empty barren fields that gets left over, and not maintained by anybody. You do see a lot of that.

For another interviewee, the benefits of cofarming translated from the local to the global – thus, “If we’re importing lots of high you know high value produce from countries that are already severely affected by climate change, Kenya, South Africa, and you know, Chile”, those countries will experience “food security issues and water use and natural resource depletion”. Producing crops more locally could be an important solution.

The food hubs were often mentioned in the interviews. These were seen as a natural alternative to food banks which rely primarily on a voucher system and address emergency needs. Yet, food banks may overlook important aspects of the food insecurity experienced by the community,

I mean it’s clear now we’re in a period where there’s a lot of people who have started to struggle to buy food because they’ve been made redundant or furloughed or they had a zero hours contract and they’re just working few hours or no hours. You know there’s quite a lot of people like that in Cambridge. It’s not what people imagine poor people to be. So there are a lot of people where this is a long standing issue that they really struggle to move forward, to pay for everything they need.

Stakeholder interviewees believed community food hubs were addressing such fundamental insecurity issues because they could be accessed by all (although an interviewee still had concerns that they are not reaching people that are “excluded because they are not online”). Since CoFarm built a good relationship with local

organizations from the start, the decision to donate all the produce of the farm during the Covid19 emergency to food hubs can be located in the context of an active food poverty alliance (CoFarm and Cambridge Sustainable Food are part of the Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance) that already had an “action plan for at least two years”. The Covid19 response was described as immediate, and the community came “together really quickly, like days in that first lockdown” to “heal their neighbourhoods” – a testament to the strength of the established relationships (even though that decision was taken by the CoFarm’ Founder and Board of Trustees, and greeted enthusiastically by the Alliance [this collaboration led to the establishment of the local food hubs], the volunteer interviews suggest that it was welcomed by the interviewees and the local community as well).

Yet, long term there were challenges to be addressed – for example, the division between volunteers and beneficiaries would ideally be replaced with a situation in which “everybody serves” and everybody benefits. The Founder of Cofarm spoke of CoFarm’s desire to continue donating around 25% of the produce to the local community but also have cofarmers benefit directly from the rest of the produce. The CoFarm project has had several funding setbacks. Major potential funders closed their funding programmes during the Covid-19 emergency, e.g. The National Lottery Community Fund and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation which meant that more paid positions could not be created. In addition, CoFarm had been unsuccessful in applying for Green Recovery Challenge Funds from DEFRA/HLF in particular to have paid trainee posts for young people not in education, employment or training. As we have seen in the interviews with CoFarm volunteers, such initiatives were considered essential for the future of the project. The interviews with the stakeholders highlighted that many efforts were being made to secure funding but that there were practical challenges to keeping volunteers updated about these developments while continuously applying for limited pots of financial support. Whereas the CoFarm management team had planned for community engagement position that would focus on widening participation and paid trainee positions, the disruption caused by the pandemic and the disruption in the funding climate meant that in the growing seasons of 2020 to 2022, all efforts were concentrated on keeping the farm operational, and establishing links with the local community. Overall, similarly to volunteers, stakeholders believed that CoFarm had a natural advantage over other sustainability projects because of the natural appeal of its message and beautiful setting.

V. Conclusions

This report suggests that CoFarm's message and vision have appealed to the volunteers this project interviewed who demonstrate strong commitment to cofarming. In many ways, these interviewees belong to a highly selected group of environmentally conscious and dedicated individuals although the volunteer pool seemed mixed in terms of age and gender (the latter insight comes from observations at the farm and the stakeholder interviews rather than from our volunteer interviewee sample). As a result of their cofarming experience, volunteers reported greater involvement with community issues and heightened awareness of food justice issues. Thus, alongside other research on this topic (Cox et al., 2008), this study suggests that this form of engagement in an alternative food network can have important community benefits which can be further strengthened through communication and the active involvement of various community actors including volunteers themselves who can bring a lot of energy and knowledge to the project. Many reported that cofarming had been responsible for keeping them in good mental health during the lockdown which aligns with findings in the social prescribing literature (Chatterjee et al., 2018, Drinkwater et al., 2019, Husk et al., 2020) and the literature on the beneficial aspects of access to nature to both the individual and the broader community (Pretty, 2022, Pretty et al., 2020, Pretty and Barton, 2020). None of our interviewees questioned the decision for all produce to be donated during the Covid19 emergency and in fact identified it as an important aspect of the cofarming activity. Next, the report on food hub beneficiaries would provide a different insight in efforts of the local community to tackle food insecurity.

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