Bringing everyone to the table: food-based initiatives for integration

Food is a powerful medium as spaces for intercultural dialogue and integration of migrants.

Food-based initiatives should aim to foster participants' independence and reduce vulnerability.

New projects should focus on skilling up legal awareness, emotional support, and labour market integration.

Access to land or long-term leases, as well as location, and community support, can make or break a project.

What is the point of food projects? Are they just about producing food? Or can they be something more, can they be mechanism for transformation in civil society? A recent report from the Food Relations project tackled these questions. Led by die Agronauten, the report explores how **initiatives based around growing, cooking, educating, and eating use food as a way to foster dialogue, knowledge-sharing, relationship-building, and new opportunities for inclusion.**

The Food Relations project brought a diverse set of food-based integration projects together for the first time, allowing them to trade ideas and practices, as well as challenges and resolutions.

The report gives a clear **introduction to the ideas around integration and inclusion initiatives, especially those working with third country nationals** (TCNs). It defines different migration categories, provides clear illustrative examples of food-based projects, outlines major strengths and weaknesses of the examined initiatives, and gives recommendations for practitioners in existing and future projects.

Knowing your onions

Food Relations was a European project that examined the impact of food-based integration projects on TCNs. TCN is an all-encompassing term, inclusive of **refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, and refers to those who are resident or in transit through a country that is not their country of origin.** TCNs can be highly vulnerable, as their social and support networks, rights, and access to employment, housing, and basic services are greatly reduced. At the best of times, integration into a new place can be challenging. For vulnerable TCNs, it can be even more so.

WANT TO GO FURTHER?
Those with questions should reach out to the listed projects directly, or to Peter Volz at die Agronauten. There is clearly continued work that needs to be done, building the network of practitioners and a database of initiatives and their practices.

http://www.urbanfoodfutures.com/TCN

URBAN FOOD FUTURES

The 35 projects and initiatives examined by Food Relations were based in 15 EU countries. **These initiatives use food as a medium through which they foster spaces for social participation, intercultural dialogue, and integration of TCNs in Europe**. A majority of the initiatives were relatively young, founded between 2014-16.

All of the selected projects met the mandatory criteria of:

- Social sustainability – e.g. working conditions
- Pedagogically supportive – e.g. supporting language learning, skills building
- Environmentally sustainable – e.g. agroecological practices
- Empowering – e.g. supportive of women

Shiny apples

Best practices were evaluated and described, to illustrate the strengths and potential impacts of the initiatives, as well as to reassure newer projects that they can overcome barriers and build resilience.

Through a variety of projects, the main best-practices highlighted the importance of:

- Integration: **it is important that initiatives foster language-learning (one of the biggest barriers), soft-skill development, trust & responsibility**, volunteers combined with professionals. The ultimate aim of initiatives should be to make the term 'TCN' irrelevant.
- Satisfaction of basic needs: not all countries or cities provide this to TCNs. Projects need to be sensitive to practicalities, and work to help establish healthy baselines, and keep people safe.
- Mental health & wellbeing: **tackling trauma from before or during the move, working with those whose legal status is insecure, and providing professional counselling where possible** can all improve TCNs psychological well-being, and the success of the project.
- Geography: **urban projects can have trouble accessing land, resources, or long-term leases**. However, good connections and partnerships with local government and community groups can facilitate access to infrastructure, and it is worth pursuing these avenues. It can be make-or-break for a project. It is also important to note that **the location of a project can be vital – too remote or inaccessible, and people, including TCNs, will not participate**. The same is true if a project is based in an unwelcoming community. These are especially important considerations for new projects.
- **Routines**: offering recurring and stable activities can provide a secure environment for TCNs, who may need longer to adapt than expected. Giving structure to days or weeks, doing morning catch-ups for emotional status, plans, and reflection can help participants integrate. At the same time, these should be participatory in nature, and not entirely prescriptive. This allows for innovation and leadership development.
- Institutional barriers: older initiatives will likely have experience with the legal frameworks around TCNs in their countries, and provide assistance with navigation through bureaucracy. Newer projects should prioritise this, and where needed, bring in external

professionals to help the team learn more about legal statuses, emotional support, and labour market integration.

- Training/skilling up: **training for economic independence can help TCNs overcome some of the feelings of isolation and dependency. Initiatives that provide training in food-based employment need to build connections with social enterprises which offer credible employment that doesn't exploit TCN labour**. They should also offer well-rounded vocational training, not limited to food, but inclusive of communication skills, job-hunting, CV preparation, and wider food-system knowledge. Initiatives should be honest when it comes to prospects, and as knowledgeable and supportive around legalities and regulations as possible.

- Networks: it is important for initiatives to build connections between different platforms, in order to facilitate training and job placements. This helps overcome some of the barriers to employment. Those initiatives that have, as part of their structure, a social business can provide internal training and employment (as well as a diversified financial model), and job-buddy programmes can build relationships between established citizens or TCNs and newer arrivals.

- Community integration: projects **need to not just integrate TCNs into the community, but have strategies to involve local residents, businesses, and government**. This can reduce friction, and increase the network of support. Regularly planned open-facing social events, like dinners, can support this outreach.

- Resilience: **two resources need to be taken seriously – finance and staffing**. A scarcity of the first often leads to an undersupply of the second, meaning that staff often take on a very heavy workload. This can lead to burnout and faster turnover of staff than is ideal. Local, national, and EU-level grants are available, and should be pursued to help support not just the social, but environmental elements, of projects. It is also beneficial when projects have diverse streams of income, e.g. through a community café or a cooking school. In addition to stable and diverse income, it is essential that staff and participants be dedicated and motivated; that leadership is clear and supportive; that broader networks be fostered; and that concrete aims are developed with action plans to see them through.

Pitfalls

The best practices from projects presents a comprehensive, if challenging, list for TCN-focused projects. However, for each best practice, there is the flip side, the challenges that initiatives confront, and which need to be taken into account when designing food integration initiatives, or improving existing ones.

These challenges are, in the main, unsurprising, but worth enumerating. This allows participants to share narratives and solutions, and not to feel alone in a struggle. The report highlighted particularly issues around:

- Finance: lack of long-term funding, cost of urban space, time involved in grant-writing.
- Stable management vs. flexibility, evolution: diversity of staff and participants' backgrounds and needs, project evolution to match

those needs, balancing stable management with a natural need to change.

- Perceptions of TCNs, cultural differences: overcoming concerns of local communities, finding volunteers, conflict and misunderstanding between new arrivals as well as with longer-term residents.
- Internal class struggles, exclusivity: balancing structure and self-organisation, building working groups that can evolve, creating roles that people can grow within, and using terminology that will appeal to both local residents and newcomers.
- Gender: **understanding the complexities of participants, gender imbalance (more men than women TCNs, more women than men as local volunteers), and supporting, but not overemphasising, the importance of women in the project and society as a whole**.
- Scale: understanding not just the local, but global, context, building a network of related projects to exchange experiences and good practice.

These potential pitfalls need not stall a project, but should be considered as both challenges and opportunities in project (re)design.

Delivery and take-aways

There are a wide range of different project types assessed in the report, including restaurants and catering, community and private events, farms, community gardens, and education projects. For each of these specific recommendations were given, along with a cross-sector call to promote sustainability in initiatives. These include, but are not limited to:

- Restaurants/catering/cooking: **using the gastronomy of TCN participants to help people feel welcome and attract others; run special events and regular dinners**; offer vocational training; network with other enterprises to create new work opportunities; focus on local and organic products where possible.
- Community gardens: reorganise working groups with some regularity to avoid cliques and hierarchies; find knowledgeable gardeners to train participants; utilise the arts as well as food to increase interest and participation; grow crops native to TCN countries; install infrastructure to facilitate sharing and fun (e.g. a garden kitchen or firepit); run activities and learning for children.
- Farms and professional gardens: offer vocational training which are supported by the state; pay fair wages; utilise schemes such as LEADER, which aim to reduce abandonment of rural areas; communicate with consumers as well as with TCNs about initiatives.
- Education: **teach in small, heterogeneous groups; focus on practicality and keep theory to a minimum; find professional educators or practitioners**; actively involve participants in teaching and learning.