
Incredible Edible: how to grow sustainable communities

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ABSTRACT This article seeks to provide an outline of the basic ideas and approaches used by the Incredible Edible programme, a community enterprise that is based in the United Kingdom. To do this the author briefly (1) defines the context for the programme, (2) defines the concepts that inform the programme, (3) and illustrates some of the action of the programme, and (4) identifies the essential changes which that needs to occur in local governance in order to support a sustainable model of community. The Incredible Edible community is one that is ready to absorb changes needed to ensure that human society becomes harmonious with the natural environment, and at the same time remains economically viable and personally fulfilling for the individual citizens.

The Context

The programme emerged from shared concerns over a set of deteriorating circumstances: we feel that they are evident as social, economic and environmental challenges.

Social

Our people feel disempowered, frustrated by change that they have little or no power to influence, and worried about issues which appear too big to solve such as climate change. This leads to frustration with existing systems, fear of the future, and lack of self-belief to be able to do anything about it.

We need to create a language and a medium for change that takes people along a route that is different, that helps them to grow more positive, empowered and healthy which in turn will build their ability and readiness to absorb change.

Economic

The existing economic model is a social, environmental and financial disaster, creating more problems than it solves. It is built upon a failed industrial model of endless economic growth through insatiable consumption which damages the environment and exhausts natural resources.

We need an alternative economic model that is ambitious for the right social, economic and ecological reasons. These new starting points can be used to design a prosperous economy that has a respect and interest for people, community well-being and for the natural environment in which it operates.

Environmental

Our natural environment is under immense strain resulting from our exploitative approach to its resources and our lack of awareness of how the natural world functions.

We need to reconnect people with the land, helping them to engage in the local environment and learn the behaviours and skills that will ensure its ecological diversity.

The Concept

We think that the concept we have created in Incredible Edible can be applied anywhere.[1] It is an approach to community renewal that can suit any context, be it large or small, urban or rural. The reason for this confidence in our programme is because it is designed upon established tools for self-reliance in response to social, economic and environmental change – personal and collective action, shared ownership and a sense of place. In this programme we focus upon growing food, a naturally occurring, and therefore almost globally applicable strategy.

The approach is very cost effective and can be developed with existing levels of finance. It is a simple idea that spreads virally, in that people enthusiastically share insights, their ideas, their activity and their learning in very practical ways. The result is that people can quickly see the effect of their efforts, it raises their awareness of the food potential of their local environment, it opens them to the possibility of new forms of enterprise, and it provides them with a local food source.

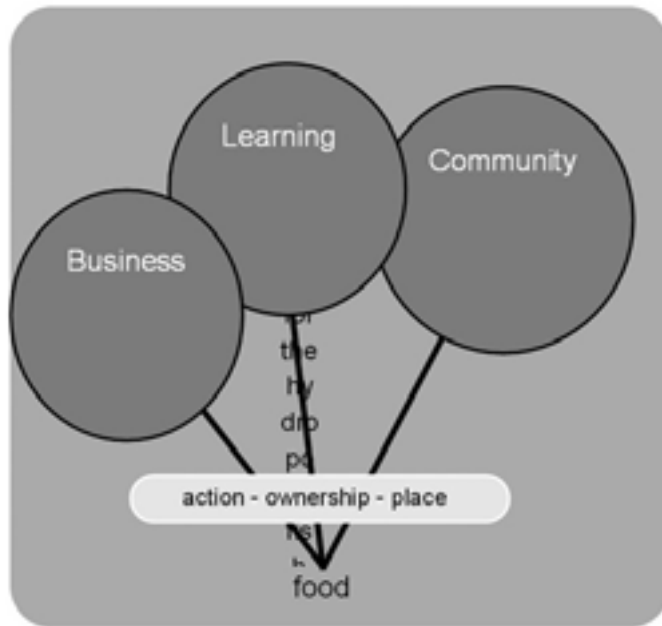
The combination of these factors make the programme both motivating and inspiring, and ensure its momentum. Our feeling is that this simply builds upon basic human social technology – where the people, their ideas, imagination, curiosity and creativity facilitate a behaviour shift. It serves as a powerful way to engage the maximum number of people in the minimum amount of time to reconnect with their social, their economic and their environmental community.

When we thought about our community we saw three different areas of activity that could be developed, each is a starting point for our community renewal.[2]

These areas were: Business, Learning, and Community.

Each of these areas can be thought of like a spinning plate – the plates captures the imaginative spirit of our programme, in that:

- Spinning plates demand action,
- Each spinning plate can be spun on its own (a federated approach) but they are mutually supportive and together they create a real show, and
- When you know your plates are all spinning it is great fun to try and keep them going.



The spinning plates provide a picture of the overall programme and this picture helps to make the idea easy for people to understand. What makes the programme really buzz are the stories that are associated with each of these spinning plates and how they demonstrate action, ownership and place – business and enterprise stories, community stories and learning stories. They all focus around the theme of local production food, they can show others how the programme operates, and demonstrate how one plate can influence, inform and set-off another plate of activity.

Over time, this helps people to build their own connections between the three areas into their own lives, and to see ways in which a personal change can have powerful repercussions on the social, business and environmental climate.

It doesn't matter which plate they begin with, their journeys into local food slowly help them make sense of the bigger picture.

An example:

Jan lives in Todmorden. She has a small terraced house with a small back-yard. Jan has always successfully grown tomatoes in her back yard, but she wants to do more. She hears about the Incredible Edible seed swap and goes along (community plate). She meets people there who want to grow more of their own food but don't have any space. They talk together about an idea of using some of the unused land around town as a community garden. She thinks some more about this and comes to a planning meeting held in the local cafe (business and community plate).

She and a group of other people who she meets there from her neighbourhood decide that they have a site for growing and that to begin with they will use planters and grow street-food (community plate). Incredible Edible has already established a working arrangement with the Local Authority so that residents can develop a range of different sites in the town (community plate), and they plan to put planters loaded with different herbs in public spaces around their local streets. These will be regularly attended and maintained by Jan and her group.

Through existing business links, Incredible Edible is able to put Jan in touch with a local manufacturer (business plate) who builds recycled wooden and plastic planters, these planters are very long-lasting, and can be made into any shape required. The local manufacturer goes with Jan and the group and they identify a series of sites which would be good starting sites for the new planters to be located. The planters are delivered flat-packed, one of Jan's group has a link with the Community Payback Scheme and participants are brought in to assist with the construction of the planters (community plate linking with business plate).

Jan's youngest daughter begins school and at the first parents meeting Jan is asked about taking part in an edible playground project (learning and community plate), this project aims to grow food on the school site, and Jan brings the planter and a new community composting idea to the school governors and the school begins a design project with parents, children and linked to the school curriculum. The school site has available land, they explore the possibility of a community allotment and orchard and begin building planters and putting in the trees.

Fast forward to a few months later, there are courses being offered in the local training centre on how to graft and prune trees, learning about horticulture, sharing planting tips and techniques, beekeeping, potting and planting, making jam and preserves, the now abundant

produce is being used for the school canteen, and parents have a plentiful supply of good quality, locally grown food.

The broader interest generated by the publicity created in the local paper about the programme stimulates people's interest in sourcing and buying local foods. More people shop locally in the town, the market-place sees a new lease of life as consumer demand for local food increases (business plate) and in response there are many more stalls setting up selling seasonal produce.

Jan now links with a Community Arts scheme and begins to develop a series of learning programmes which she takes to schools to help them to design and build edible playgrounds [3] this new enterprise has enabled her to manage her working life more successfully, providing a balance between the community activity, and then taking those ideas to new environments to help others to do the same (community, learning and business plates).

The example shows how people quickly get the point of local food, it is not a hard sell, but equally important it is not a quick fix. It takes time to establish and integrate the idea into long-term structural solutions in each of the areas defined by the spinning plates. If we can learn to feed ourselves in our communities, and establish this as a long-term fabric of our local economies, then over time we can aim to become more food secure and at the same time, have a greater degree of understanding and awareness of our relationship and responsibility to develop our community harmoniously with the environment.

So What is Incredible Edible?

As we have shown, there's no clever pitch for Incredible Edible. Just as with the idea of sustainability – it's a way of living and of looking at life.

Here are some of the cornerstones of what we do.

Creating opportunities for people to imagine and develop new projects.

Finding land and space within the built environment to grow food, using buildings, micro-finance and other tools and resources to rethink that approaches that are currently taken.

Investment in local enterprises that support food production within the community.

Providing the route to training in land skills and to environmentally conscious ways of distributing and buying food.

Enabling actions by public bodies to help people to help themselves allowing organisations in authority to re-design their approaches to support and facilitate community renewal by helping them to help themselves.

Removal of obstacles to local action – e.g. by taking away legal boundaries, covering public liability and campaigning.

We Work to a Set of Principles

- The active engagement of people, around a sense of place and belonging.
- Shared objectives that are understandable to everyone.
- A strong belief in ourselves.
- Intuitively sensing that what we do is urgently needed.
- Not constrained by rhetoric or fancy words, not dependent on the permission of others.
- We recognise that there is no one solution, but a jigsaw of many parts.
- Reward for labour.
- The creation of jobs. Families harvesting and keeping and sharing the fruits of their labour.
- Openness: you tell us. We are an open group. These are our first answers to questions we're being asked a lot. When we've more space and time, maybe we can paint a very big picture.

Growing the Programme

A good example of how our three spinning plates combine to form new ways of thinking about a local community economy comes in our plans to combine social-enterprise, learning and community through the development of a Hydroponic Fish Farm in the grounds of the High School. This high-protein food production unit has been designed in response to the abuse and overfishing of the marine environment. It is a model which can be applied as both low and high-tech according to requirement, so it can effectively operate within a small community on something like a school-site, or be hosted in a city block depending upon demand. It is an entirely self-sustaining design, and in our case it has been established as a Community Interest Company, so it brings together on a board of trustees a range of people from the school staff and students, business and community to oversee the growth of a major new development focused on food production and ecosystem learning for the town. This will generate new jobs, and produce fish and vegetables on a year-round basis. It is intended that this site will serve as the first example of a community food-hub, combining new learning, qualifications, skills and technologies to facilitate and support the wider developments taking place in the region. It will illustrate in a practical way, how food, and food related enterprise and learning can establish a new social, economic and environmental direction for communities.

We think that the new Fish Farm and its linked technology will greatly support our efforts, offering new techniques and scientific understanding which will play an important part in developing the appropriate solutions to the local climatic conditions under which we will grow our food in the future.

We realise that technology such as the Fish Farm are powerful symbols of change taking place which can inspire and encourage others to participate, and as we have already emphasised we know that technology alone is not enough,

we need the human technology that grows through social, economic and the environmental community to forge a new future around food.

Essential Changes

Finally, as a result of our reflection on what we have learnt over the last few years of Incredible Edible, we are now making some suggestions here for simple but essential changes in our society in the ways in which local government and the various agencies that connect with local communities and business might help us in our efforts to grow sustainable communities.

We have framed them in the idea of ten issues for 2010, or 10 for 10!

- (1) Build schools for the future that have the living edible world at their heart.
- (2) Transform health buildings with edible plants and trees as an integral part of the design and workplace.
- (3) All public bodies to release land for food growing.
- (4) Plan for food – Support local food production through the planning system with all local plans identifying places for growing.
- (5) Tick all the boxes – Make growing a performance indicator for 'well-being' for all Public Services.
- (6) Insist all new homes to have ready-to-grow spaces.
- (7) All social landlords to allocate space for growing.
- (8) Charter for truly local markets – support local food producers and farmers and campaign for the reallocation of subsidies.
- (9) Make sure public bodies like schools and health authorities have as a priority to procure local food.
- (10) Invest in food skills for the future. We need incredible degrees and diplomas, cooks and technologists, farmers and fabulous food producers.

We are finding that people everywhere recognize the urgent need for action but are often unsure how to act. We are also finding that people are recognising that top-down action alone will not be enough, and that people can make a huge difference in their simple everyday changes in the way they participate and contribute to the world around them.

We are also realising that technological solutions on their own will not be enough. We need to change the way we think and live, and how we value our environment. We've been learning valuable lessons through Incredible Edible about local action focused on food, and how it can make a real difference to the way our communities function.

We believe that any community can be an incredible community – all they need is the will to become one.

Notes

- [1] Our experience of talking to people about the programme across the UK, in China, Australia, USA and Europe and with colleagues working on aid programmes in Africa suggests it is an idea that is ‘incredibly spreadable’!
- [2] We developed this programme with no outside funding, any new initiative we have adopted has come through existing levels of finance. Where new finance has emerged it is spent on exactly what we require, enabling funding bodies and other authorities to have a clear line to the impact of their support. We do not develop the initiative simply through external or internal funding but through interest, community and business involvement and through education and understanding of our overall goals.
- [3] See Tod Futures (admin@todfutures.co.uk).

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