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A vibrant still life composition featuring a variety of fresh ingredients and flowers. In the center are several long, bright red chard stalks. To the right, a dark bowl is filled with ripe strawberries and blackberries. Sliced blood oranges with deep red flesh are scattered around. Several orange tulips are in bloom, adding a touch of softness. A pair of dark-handled scissors with a red beaded cord lies on the left. Small, vintage-style photographs are tucked among the items. The entire scene is set against a clean, white background.

# FOOD LADDERS

## A MULTI-SCALED APPROACH TO EVERYDAY FOOD SECURITY AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

### **Finding innovative interventions for building food secure communities**

Food Ladders is a novel, evidenced-based approach for creating household and community resilience by capitalising on the capacity of food to bring people together. Food Ladders is not like existing household food insecurity approaches that focus on the lack of good food within households and then feeds that gap. Instead, Food Ladders activates food and its related practices progressively to reduce local vulnerability to food insecurity and its knock-on effects.

#### **Specifically Food Ladders advocates for:**

- Mobilising the more than nutrient, calorie and commercial aspects of food, such as its capacity to bring people together to foster shared understanding and collaboration;
- Creating safe and inclusive spaces for experimentation and interaction with food;
- Using a positive language of empowerment around food;
- Building place-specific levels of support that enable the recognition and enhancement of locally based assets to create transformations in communities.



## What is the Food Ladders approach?

Food Ladders are community scale interventions aimed at building local level resilience in the face of food insecurity. The approach was developed for low-income communities to address the wider effects that poverty has on health, wellbeing, and community cohesion. However, all communities can benefit from Food Ladders. The approach is not intended to replace national level campaigns, but instead complements those campaigns and may even foster locally based activism. Food Ladders works with the specificities of places to enable three levels of intervention. These include:

- 1. Catching.** This first rung provides a starting point for those who are in crisis. Such interventions might include emergency food aid, mental health support, access to social services, etc. Catching enables the ability to cope with a shock, whether that be the loss of a job, an unexpected large payment, debt, longer-term illness or relationship breakdown.
- 2. Capacity building to enable social innovation.** This second level supports those not currently in crisis, but who may be struggling to afford and/or access good food. Activities include training programmes, shared cooking and eating activities, food pantries, children's holiday clubs, and voucher schemes. Done in a manner that celebrates difference and is not stigmatising, activities provide residents with accessible choices that relieve the stresses that co-exist with low-incomes, expand skills, and enable the recognition of personal and local assets. These interventions connect people together by creating networks of trust and reciprocity through shared activity around food. This sort of intervention enables people and communities to be more adaptable by expanding their pool of assets.
- 3. Self-organised community change.** This third rung supports communities to realise goals through self-organised projects that capitalise on local assets. Projects meet the community needs as identified by the communities themselves. Examples include developing a social enterprise based on community cooking knowledge that provides employment, community story-telling that leads to activism, cooperative food growing and food procurement that increases the local availability of good food, regular social cooking and eating activities to overcome loneliness, cross social divides and create intergenerational knowledge transfer.



## What is the role of the local authority and community organisations?

For Food Ladders to work there must be a process that enables local learning and an expectation of movement from step 1 to step 3. It may be that interventions provided by local authorities or community organisations will be quite intensive at step 1 and 2, with a more facilitative role at step 3. What specifically is achieved at step 3 must incorporate local voices and build on locally held assets. Local authorities

can help develop local community organisational capacity to be able to see where they fit into the ladder and then support developments that ensure there are people working across the ladder in local places.

Local authorities and local food networks can develop Food Ladders by doing the following:

- Map services and community organisations to identify support deserts at each level.
- Identify food partners and other organisations to support local activities.
- Act as a connecting agent helping to facilitate mentoring networks across communities to share good practice.
- Participate in national networks of communities seeking to achieve similar goals (e.g., the Incredible Edible network and/or Sustainable Food Cities) and pass learning on to communities.
- Identify and make available existing infrastructures such as council owned land and buildings that can be used as community food spaces.
- Review existing processes and policies to understand where they might be creating barriers to community self-organisation and success and make appropriate changes.

## What can the food industry do?

In the simplest terms, the food industry can provide surplus food either directly or in collaboration with surplus food redistributors to community organisations that help meet the needs of community food activities. Food gets people in the door and supporting community organisations to access this food and understand how it can produce the best social good is a key support intervention. Retailers may also be able to provide space and know-how to communities to help them achieve their goals, as well as financial resources and donations. Food surplus redistributors can support connectivity and learning across their networks of food using organisations by providing insight on good practice and skills development alongside access to good food.

## The research behind the Food Ladders approach:

Food Ladders was developed through a series of research projects funded by the ESRC, MRC, and The N8 AgriFood Programme. This interdisciplinary work is a collaboration with a wide range of partners including local authorities, food industry actors, national charities and community organisations across the UK, which enabled a better understanding of what is working in communities and where different levels of resources and challenges are situated. A special mention goes to Gary Stott (Community Shop and Incredible Edible) and Samantha Siddall (ECO), Rupert Suckling (Doncaster Metropolitan Council), and the teams at Greater Manchester Poverty Action and FareShareUK.

## If you would like to know more about Food Ladders please contact:

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