

Taste of a Better Future:

A participatory evaluation

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For further information on how to grow organic food in groups and schools, please contact WEN and ask for the *Marigold Information Pack* (Price: £5 including postage). The pack is also available in Bengali and Somali.

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Abstract

The Taste of a Better Future network is a project of the Women's Environmental Network that aims to engage the expertise of women from diverse cultures in inner-city organic growing projects.

As the first full growing season has come to an end and the project is well on the way to meeting its target of a twenty-group network, the time has come for an in-depth evaluation by the groups themselves.

This report examines what makes organic growing groups an empowering experience for the participants. All of the women said their lives had changed for the better; the project has made them happier and helped them to fight boredom.

The women support the organic methods of growing and praise the quality of the vegetables, as they relate with their experience of growing in their home countries. It was interesting to note the role of the vegetable garden as a place of natural beauty and the feeling of connection with their country of origin.

Remarkable differences in strength from one growing group to another, the crucial importance of socialising to the participants, and opportunities for cultural integration have all shown the great potential for increasing interactions and networking between the groups. Finally, pressures on the groups are examined, with school-based groups facing difficult constraints, along with the specific support that WEN has provided.

A set of specific recommendations to be fed back into the planning process concludes the evaluation.

The Taste of a Better Future Project: a participatory evaluation

1 - Introduction

The Taste of a Better Future project

The Taste of a Better Future project of the Women's Environmental Network (WEN) aims to empower ethnic minority women to grow their own organic food on areas of land near where they live.

The project has defined quantifiable objectives to be reached by the end of the March 2001, the key aim being to create a unique national network of twenty organic growing groups of women from minority ethnic communities. This objective is well on way to being reached as, 18 months into the project, 59 groups and individuals have joined WEN's Taste of a Better Future Network. Of these 18 have requested advice and support from WEN to varying degrees. WEN is currently working closely with 15 groups.

On-going evaluation by the project worker takes place quarterly to assess progress and further plan the project. An information pack has been produced to encourage and assist the creation of growing groups. The pack was translated into Bengali and Somali, widely distributed and will soon be available via the internet. As the quantitative objectives of the project are about to be met and the first full season of growing has just gone by, it seemed time to take the evaluation one step further.

The rationale of participatory evaluation

The evaluation system of a project needs to be based on the values and philosophy of the organisation and on the nature of the project itself. The Taste of a Better Future project aspires to be both educational and community-based. Because local communities are the 'clients' of the project, they need to be involved at all its stages, particularly that of evaluation (Sen, 1987).

WEN's pledge is "to inform, educate and empower women and men who care about the environment" and WEN strives for a truly participatory form of education. A major aim of the project is to engage the expertise of women from diverse cultures in growing projects, and enable more women to enjoy growing healthy food (WEN, 1999). Women should not be considered as mere receivers of information but as creators of knowledge. WEN and the partner communities are working together to build up knowledge and experience. This is only possible when the need for a reviewing progress is taken seriously and the evaluation results are fed back into the process. In that sense, the educational process and the evaluation process are inextricably intertwined.

It is hoped that this report will give further insight into the value of the project to WEN and the growing groups themselves, local government, funders and anyone interested in local food and cultural diversity issues.

2 - Methodology

The chosen method of evaluation was that of a questionnaire. This was mainly due to language constraints. Other research methods such as participatory group meetings were not thought to be feasible, at least, at this stage. All of the members of the groups surveyed happened to be Bangladeshi.

The questionnaire was devised based on the SWOT analysis, which entails examining the 'Strengths', 'Weaknesses', 'Opportunities' and 'Threats' of a project (Rea 2000). 'Opportunities' stand for the possible improvements to the project, while the notion of 'Threats' requires an appreciation of the constraints to such improvement.

All the questions were open. In other words, none of the answers were prompted, so even if an idea was only mentioned two or three times, our view is that it should be considered of central importance.

Four groups were visited and another five groups responded by phone and fax. Another group, The Gardening for Health project in Bradford, had already carried out a similar evaluation in January 2000. The result of their research is referred to in the discussion of the results below.

Sixteen questionnaires were filled in. Replies to the questions were translated by the group's worker and written down by WEN's project worker and a volunteer. We were not able to facilitate group discussions partly because of language problems, and also because of time constraints due to women wanting to get on with their activities. Nevertheless, out of the sixteen replies, nine are from women participants and seven from their group workers.

The process however had its pitfalls, mainly because the idea of evaluation and questionnaires was foreign to the women participants. Some women for instance seemed eager to please and tell us that all was well, although we had heard of arguments over the sharing of vegetables. The research carried out by the Gardening for Health project encountered similar difficulties with women feeling uneasy with the idea of evaluation (Hussain and Robinson, 2000). A future evaluation would have to rethink on ways, if any, to avoid such incidence. A full account of the replies is given in the following section.

3 - Results of the participatory evaluation

Expectations and enjoyment of the growing groups by women participants

The first motivation for joining a growing group is a social one, with ten women mentioning the importance of making friends, meeting other women gardeners and working together.

Health comes close behind with eight mentions, recognition being given to both the benefits of fresh healthy food and those of exercising.

Another important motivation is the enjoyment of natural beauty (four mentions). The garden is seen as a beautiful natural place to come to and to nurture. Two women said they enjoyed admiring the vegetables growing. Equally important is the link the garden provides with the home country. Three mentioned the importance of growing Bengali vegetables and one said her main reason for coming was that she saw her country in the garden.

Last and not least, four women added that without their group, they would not be able to grow as their garden was much too small, or they had no garden at all.

In terms of changes in the women's lives since they joined a group, four mentioned they felt much happier and another four emphasised the importance of fighting boredom and finding something to do. One group worker also noted that the women participants had gained greater confidence since the group started and had been demanding more out of the project (e.g. coming up with the idea of visiting a fruit picking farm).

Strengths of the growing groups

Each individual group has got strikingly different strengths:

- The Wapping Women's Centre group is very good at holding meetings, making group decisions and allowing the voicing of opinions. The very coming into being of the group is seen as very positive.
- The Jagonari group has an occasional lunch club and a visiting horticultural therapist, from the non-governmental organisation, Thrive. She runs regular sessions and teaches them new skills. Two women mentioned they enjoyed learning to mix the soil with compost and do transplants. The group was said to work well. Someone also highlighted the benefits of learning English names for the vegetables.
- The Coriander Club gives a college-certified course in organic food growing and has had several fundraising successes.
- The Thomas Buxton School has created a particularly nice space in the school enclosure.
- The Garrett Centre has a successful lunch club.

Vegetables grown organically

Organically grown produce include beans, coriander, potatoes, pumpkin, tomatoes, amaranthus (all mentioned three times), lettuce (2 mentions), carrots, cherry tomatoes, cucumber, flowers, rhubarb (1 mention each).

It was not possible for the women to estimate how much was grown, as none of the groups measures the harvest. In one group, women sometimes take the produce home otherwise they cook it together in the centre. In another, harvest took place twice a week in the summer and was equally divided between all the participants. Two groups have not started growing yet.

Weaknesses of the growing groups

Problems encountered are mainly related to group management issues, lack of space, and funding. In addition, school-based groups face very specific problems. Apart from this, five women explicitly said they did not find any weaknesses to their group.

Three mentions were made of problems related to group management issues. In one group, some gardeners did not abide by the rules and made extra plots. There were also problems of men's interference in the plots - situated on an estate. They made unpleasant remarks that made the women feel uncomfortable. They were given a warning at the group's meeting. Another group had difficulties in sharing the vegetables, with arguments over who grew what.

Equally important are the needs for space and money. In one group with a limited number of individual plots, there is a waiting list. In another, forty-five ladies are coming to the group as the word is spreading. Another group only has windowsills to grow herbs.

As for finances, one group said much had not gone according to plan because of lack of funding and that they lacked soil and water. The financial problems of new groups seeking to start up were also emphasised.

A school-based group is facing a difficult problem of leadership, as the teacher who had started the group was asked by her head to use her time elsewhere, and the garden, despite its great potential, is lying uncared for. After discussion, the teacher thought she would try and motivate the parents to take the lead and get help from the network. In another school, the group is taken by BTCV due to the lack of time of the teacher, and the worker says she has still to find ways of involving the parents. In a third school, the teacher is on the verge of giving up due to time constraints, and for this very reason was not able to reply to the questionnaire. One worker from a women's centre group also faced time constraints and remarked on the slowness of starting a new group in these conditions.

Finally, a diversity of questions specifically related to gardening were mentioned. The question of the contamination of the site, the need for a visiting gardener to keep coming to teach the group, women not wanting to garden in the winter, and the older women's group being unable to dig and water .

Possible improvements to the groups

In three of the groups, the main suggestions concerned improving gardening facilities. Needed improvements for the Wapping group include fencing, a compost heap, containers, a tool shed and a net to protect plants. Some funding applications are on the way and gravel should be put down by a bank based in the City. Women in the

Jagonari group asked for a bigger garden, a greenhouse, more pots, soil and chairs and a tool shed and are thinking about the possibility of digging up concrete and extending the bed. The Toch group said they needed fencing for privacy and to prevent rubbish to be dumped.

Another important element was the women's desire to learn more English through gardening and to have their English classes based around gardening (3 mentions).

Other suggestions were to have individual plots, space permitting (2 mentions), to increase the diversity of the vegetables grown (2 mentions), to organise more trips for the groups (2 mentions), to have travel expenses paid and more space for praying (1 mention each).

Past support from WEN's network of growing groups

Three groups emphasised the importance of knowing that someone is at hand for help. Three groups also said the advice on fundraising was extremely important.

Two groups particularly benefited from WEN's launch of the project at the House of Parliament last July. The ensuing publicity greatly facilitated funding. In one case, the photo of the women with their local MP, taken at the event, enabled the group to secure a grant from the local Tesco store, get an article in East End Life and an interview on BBC Asian Network.

Another two groups mentioned that WEN's support was absolutely crucial to help the group start off.

Suggestions on how to improve the network's support

There was a definite request for meeting other groups and exchange visits (4 mentions). Women from two well-established groups said they had a great deal of experience in growing vegetables thanks to their rural background, and they were eager to share it. Another two school-based group workers said they would benefit from other groups' advice. Three group workers particularly supported the idea of network meetings. Three workers also called for further cooperation on local publicity.

Finally, three groups requested outside advice on gardening. Regular sessions of gardeners' question time were suggested on matters such as poisonous plants, organic issues, protection from frost.

4 - Discussion: central elements emerging from the findings

The participants felt very strongly about the social and health benefits of their growing group. It was also interesting to note the role of the vegetable garden as a place of natural beauty and their feelings of connection with their country of origin.

An empowering experience

These improvements in their lives are extremely significant considering the isolation Bangladeshi women often find themselves in: bound to their home by domestic duties, cultural expectations and fear of racism and discrimination (Hussain and Robinson, 2000). All of the women said their lives had changed for the better, the project making them happier and helping them to fight boredom.

Suggestions on the ways to improve their groups also show that women have developed a certain assertiveness, as they felt more motivated to learn English and wanted to link English and gardening, both in gardening and English classes. This change is crucial as the fact these women speak little English only reinforces their isolation, helplessness and reliance on the men to speak up for them (Hussain and Robinson, 2000). In this regard, the network has the potential to play a role of integration with other groups from different cultural backgrounds.

All, but one, of the groups that replied to the questionnaire have only been growing for under a year. Such findings are therefore very encouraging for such a short time span. The Gardening for Health project, a growing group for Bangladeshi women which had been going on for four years at the time of the evaluation, also showed that women were more confident. Some admitted that they previously would have been afraid to go out on their own, while they now know their way around better and feel less afraid. This new confidence had also influenced other aspects of their lives, as they requested English classes, sewing classes, driving lessons and in four cases, assertiveness sessions (Hussain and Robinson, 2000).

Another admirable example is that of a participant in the Coriander Club, one of the group that responded to WEN's questionnaire, who will soon be taking on the responsibility of the group as a paid part-time worker. These instances pave the way to what empowerment can be in this context.

Environmental appreciation and awareness

The evaluation has shown that participants greatly enjoy this opportunity to come back into contact with the beauty of the natural environment within the inner city. Besides their many personal benefits, such experiences are valuable as a potential first step towards awareness of environmental issues. Research in environmental education shows that personal experiences of the natural environment are crucial in leading people into environmental concern and action (Palmer, 1998).

On the whole, women support the organic methods of growing and praise the quality of the vegetables, as they relate with their experience of growing in their home countries. There has been an instance in the past where women have wanted to use fertilisers and pesticides, but explanations by Nicola, the horticultural therapist from Thrive, seemed to be well received. Further investigation of the women's perception of these issues would therefore be beneficial in a future evaluation.

Finally, several of the groups have become members of WEN and, as result, are getting introduced to campaigns on composting and real nappies. These developments meet one of WEN's initial objectives for the project to reach out to the diversity of

Britain's cultural groups, as these have largely been ignored by the environmental movement.

As the project develops, WEN will need to remain faithful to its participatory education approach, and be aware of not imposing its values of sustainable living. Participants' comments - such as "In this garden , I see my country" - show that the project currently fulfils the women's own values.

The scope for a network and greater interaction between groups

The remarkable differences in strength from one group to another has shown that groups would greatly benefit from further interaction. Women participants have all said that they very much enjoy socialising. They would like to have more opportunities to do so and share experiences with others groups. Insecurity in terms of travelling means they would have to be taken as a group by their workers.

The case of the Thomas Buxton School's group is an interesting illustration of this need for further interaction. Despite the teacher's commitment, her severe time constraints meant that the group had to suspend growing at the beginning of this school year. The school however is a direct neighbour to the Coriander Club in Spitafields City Farm, but was not aware that the garden there was fully-grown and home to a college course in organic gardening. During the evaluation, the teacher suggested having some of the women from the (slightly crowded) Coriander Club come and help the parents to revive their garden. As this report is being written, the Club's workers have now led a gardening session for the school's parents.

In terms of the problems encountered by groups, exchange visits between two groups might not only allow for constructive suggestions, but also put these problems into perspective, give extra encouragement to face difficulties and reinforce their pride in belonging to their group and the network.

There is therefore much scope to develop ways of interaction within the network. The idea of network meetings of the groups' workers was very welcome during the evaluation. Another way of involving the women participants themselves, taking into account the national dimension of the network, would be a multilingual newsletter. It could both encourage the groups and the individual women to share a recipe or the lessons from an experience, and address areas of shared interest and concern.

WEN's role in providing support

The evaluation highlighted the fact that WEN's support was highly valued both from those groups starting from scratch and those already established. The two most well-established groups both insisted on the importance of WEN's publicity. The launch at the House of Commons proved to be an occasion for the women to meet and take pride in their groups, raising awareness of the issues and opening up new fundraising opportunities.

The new groups have found WEN's support and information invaluable as it covers a wide range of issues from gardening to fundraising. One project worker currently initiating a group was emphasising the importance of personal meetings when the group was in infancy: "I've learnt so much every time I meet you, as this is all a new experience for me. You've been very supportive".

As WEN is seeking to develop a national network, face-to-face meetings can be very time consuming for the project worker. Ways of improving the communication of WEN's and the Network's knowledge therefore need to be further investigated - e.g. giving introductory seminars to a group of workers regionally, producing a video or an interactive website.

Constraints encountered by the growing groups

In terms of the problems encountered by the groups, there are no cases of growing not going ahead because of lack of funding or space.

The lack of space remains a difficult issue that requires improved cooperation with the local authorities and a case-by-case attention. As for funding, some groups have been very skilful in securing help and funds from large companies in the City. Extra funds are nevertheless indispensable for further improving the groups.

A crucial point highlighted by the evaluation was that the only factor that ever suspended growing in two of the network's groups was not space or money, but the drastic time constraints faced by all teachers wanting to lead school-based groups. In a third school-based group, the problem was solved by BTCV becoming the students' partner in developing their group. This highlights the continuing need for WEN to act as an intermediary between groups and expert advice, as another two groups requested regular gardening advice sessions.

The research also found that soil is a major need for all the London-based groups at least. The Coriander Club for instance is planning to spend £2,000 next year on compost, i.e. 20% of its provisional budget, the rest being allocated to the worker's salary. In this regard, WEN is planning to present easy means of composting to the groups and to carry out training.

5 - Conclusion and recommendations

This process of participatory evaluation has been a very worthwhile one in many ways. It has been another step, for both WEN and the groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the benefits of organic growing groups for women participants and what empowerment and sustainability mean in this context. It has highlighted a significant scope to encourage groups to learn from each other. It has also been a process of brainstorming on ways to improve the groups and the network taking into account the current constraints. These findings now need to be fed back into the planning of the project.

Following the participatory evaluation of the Taste of a Better Future project, the author of this report recommends the following:

- Sustain general support and information, while developing means to further spread WEN's and the network's expertise; investigate the possibility of an interactive website and regional seminars for group workers;
- Strengthen fundraising advice; investigate the possibility of a fundraising database and other ways of putting companies in touch with groups; pursue publicity;
- Offer opportunities and advice for those women participants willing to go out and share their expertise; pursue role as intermediary between groups and organic gardening advice available;
- Continue meetings with local authorities to improve cooperation and support particularly on the question of extra space;
- Start introducing the groups to easy means of composting as planned;
- Develop the diversity of cultural backgrounds of the groups belonging to the network, including white women's groups; encourage the linking of English language and gardening sessions in women's centres belonging to the network;
- Go ahead with plans to organise network meetings; consider the creation of a multilingual newsletter as a tool for both communication and empowerment; and facilitate exchange visits between groups;
- Focus a future evaluation or research project on the women participants' views of organic and environmental issues; re-consider cultural constraints on the evaluation process.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

**Taste of a Better Future questionnaire:
Are you enjoying your organic growing group?**

The Taste of a Better Future Network

Your growing group is part of a network of growing groups that are dedicated to growing organic food. This network, called the Taste of a Better Future Network, is coordinated and supported by WEN, a women's environmental group. The aim of the network is to support you with information, encouragement and fundraising advice and to put you in touch with any other helpful organisation and other women's growing groups all over the country.

Aim of the questionnaire

The aim of this questionnaire is to enable WEN to further assess how each of you are enjoying their growing groups and how you could further benefit from the network. This could be an extra opportunity for everyone to voice their opinion and take the time to discuss altogether the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for your group.

Thank you for taking the time to answer the following questions!

x x x

Your expectations and enjoyment of the growing group

Question 1 - Why did you join an organic growing group? (Please list all sorts of reasons in order of importance.)

Question 2 - What has changed in your life since you have joined the growing group?

Strengths and weaknesses of your growing group

Question 3 - What are the strengths of your growing group?

Question 4 - What produce have the group grown this year and in what quantities?

Question 5 - What are the weaknesses of your growing group?

Question 6 - What could be done to improve your growing group? List as many ideas as possible.

Question 7 - What problems would you encounter to put these ideas into practice?

The network

Question 8 - How has the network of growing groups supported by WEN helped you in the past?

Question 9 - How could the network be more helpful to your group? Please list as many ideas as possible.

Appendix 2: Participating groups contact details

- **Bradford Community Environment Project (BCEP)**
Unit 9, Carlisle Business Centre, Carlisle Road, Bradford BD8 8BD
Worker: Jane Robinson, Tel: 01274 223 236

- **The Coriander Club**
c/o Spitalfields City Farm, Weaver St., London E1 5HJ
Outreach Worker: Lutfun Hussain, Tel: 020 7247 8762
They are growing herbs and vegetables and also running a course.

- **The Garrett Centre**
117 Mansford St., London E2 6LX
Worker :Waheeda Haque, Tel: 020 7729 1231

- **Jagonari Women's Education and Resource Centre**
183-185 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DW
Older Woman's Project Worker: Shahanara Kalam, Tel: 020 7375 0520
They are developing a garden at their centre in conjunction with Thrive and WEN.

Thrive, St Mary's Garden Project, PO Box 1379, London E2 8TB;
Margaret Lipscombe, Tel: 020 7739 2965

- **Langdon Park School**
Byron St., London E14 0RY
Teacher: Tom Shearne, Tel: 020 7987 4811
After school growing club, also developing wildlife garden, in conjunction with BTCV East London

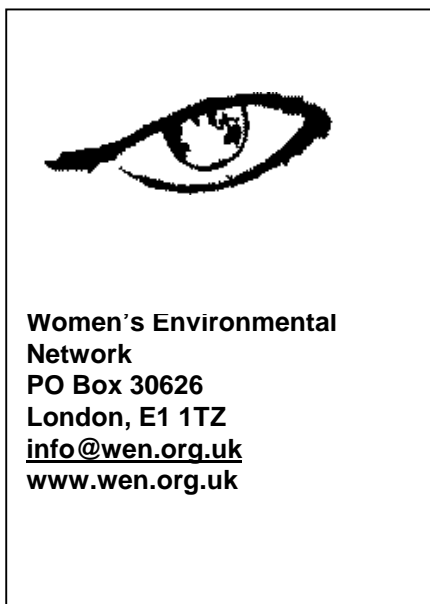
BTCV East London
46 Aberfeldy Street, London E14 ONV
Worker: Emma Harrington, Tel: 020 7987 1226

- **St George Community School**
Russeltown Ave., Bristol BS5 9JB
Teacher: Caroline Gray, Tel: 0117 9553141

- **Thomas Buxton School**
Buxton Street, London E1 5AR
Teacher: Neela Momem, Tel: 020 7247 3816

- **Toch For Families Under Pressure**
c/o Ensign Youth Club, Wellclose Square, London E1 8HY
Worker: Nurun Nihar, Tel: 020 7702 311

- **Wapping Women's Centre**
Philchurch Place, off Pinchin St., London E1 1PU
Worker: Sufia Alam, Tel: 020 702 0036



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