

Learning from the Bringing People Together Programme 2021-2024

Case Study – Rural-Urban Twinning (The Real Farming Trust)

“If you want to do something about inclusion and making a difference, do something with another organisation (or person) that you have nothing in common with, you will learn something and something will change.” (Project lead)

Background

The Rural-Urban Twinning Project (**Twinning**) was designed by the Real Farming Trust (RFT) to enable connections and mutual understanding between people from different walks of life, especially between urban and rural communities, including marginalised groups. The project is also exploring ways for people to enter physical spaces that they rarely go to, such as the inner city or the countryside.

RFT is a social enterprise that supports agroecology, farming that works with nature to produce good food for everyone by fundamental changes across the food and farming system so that it becomes more just and sustainable.

The Twinning project grew out of a growing sense that not only are many people disconnected from nature, the countryside and where their food comes from, but they are socially disconnected too. In addition, different kinds of food organisations are socially or geographically separate, limiting the solutions available to them.

“We have noticed that some food networks and some communities are limited in their ideas and solutions because their geographic and social worlds are boundaried. It is difficult to find ways to meet meaningfully as equals with groups of people we do not already know.....Twinning is an attempt to reduce discrimination and increase opportunity.....We believe that confident, powerful, inclusive, well-resourced communities can offer a protective response to some of the current unjust social and economic forces affecting society.”

This 4-year project started in April 2023, and is experimental and curious at heart. It comprises four sets of twinned organisations/groups, as follows:

- In Northern Ireland, NOW, a disability organisation working primarily with people with a learning disability and autism with a focus on enabling their employment, is paired with a small community farm
- In South Wales, an organisation based in Swansea supporting migrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers is paired with a well-established community farm on the Gower
- In Gloucestershire, an established community farm near Stroud is paired with Somali Kitchen, a large network of Somalian women offering mutual support in Bristol
- In Cornwall, a food bank in Truro is paired with a community farm in near Falmouth

Groups of people from each partner in the pair meet each other on both sites and collaborate to understand each other's perspectives. They decide what they would like to do together and how this will work. RFT enables each pair to access BPT funding to implement their ideas. Twinned organisations and participants are free to choose whatever kind of local event/activity they run together, as long as they meet the Twinning aims and work to achieve the followed impact areas:

1. People from your community make new connections with people they wouldn't normally meet
2. Through working with your Twin you will broaden your practice through being both a teacher and a learner.
3. You will support people from your community to deliver activities on the things that matter to them
4. Twinning will help people in your community "find their voice"
5. Social and physical horizons will be widened for members of your community and your Twin
6. Experimentation takes place of ways of bridging divides and building better knowledge of what works
7. Learning is shared beyond the project with other social justice/agroecological organisations.

Although not specified, so far all Twins have chosen to design their activities and events based on food and farming.

What has happened?

An initial, set-up period of six months helped to grow the project from its roots as an idea to something practical and meaningful across four different locations. The community farms involved in each pair were all known to RFT, but their twins were not. It took time and courage to reach out, engage and find suitable twins for each location, using a combination of the project lead's personal contacts, colleagues' networks and cold calling potential partners. "I spoke to lots of organisations who didn't fit before finding ones that matched".

Challenges in this pre-project era included resources (this element was unpaid) particularly time, in establishing relationships and governance arrangements with very small, community led and grassroots organisations. It was however essential, and the project team has learned that investing time to build relationships and engage with diverse communities and organisations in ways that create mutual understanding and trust is a vital ingredient for success.

"Getting the whole thing going has been epic, engaging people, making a plan. We're starting to see things emerge....realising each twin has made relationships, been back and forth, they got it, signed up for it, it's meaningful and they are up for it. It's important that RFT is also working in new situations with organisations we didn't previously know. We also have plenty to learn from this."

Over the first year, the Twin organisations strengthened these relationships, visiting each other to shape their schedule of joint events and activities, but more importantly, to get to know each other through some early shared activities, such as:

- Adults with learning difficulties from NOW in Belfast learnt horticulture skills at Jubilee Farm, some started volunteering on the farm and thinking about possibilities of paid work in the future.
- Asylum seekers from several countries enjoyed attending the Harvest Festival at Cae Tan Farm near Swansea, where a cook from Zanzibar led a cooking session with farm veg in the garden for everyone from both partners in this Twin. People shared stories of cooking on open fires at previous times in their lives.
- A group of Somali families came to Stroud to cook a Somalian lunch using farm vegetables. The communities had a lively shared meal and farm visit.

A measure of the bonds created and connections established can be seen through shared learning about what isn't working. For example, how people feel when not many people come to events; exploring why this might be and learning that very small, micro interactions are just as important as large-scale events; and discussing how to do things differently if people don't mix or mingle as anticipated.

"I was a bit afraid to go to visit in the inner city, you know, knife crime, that sort of thing. I haven't been to a city for a long time. I was pleased to have a lift and go in a group. I'm glad I went, we had a good day."

Over the course of the second year relationships have grown as a result of the insights, understanding and often surprising connections made. It has taken a while for some of the benefits of connection to emerge and be articulated. For example, the importance of being in the countryside for people's wellbeing especially when coming from very deprived urban areas. *"One twin is now wanting nature in the place where they live. They're shifting their views about who we are, where we live, what we would like"*.

"We went to volunteer in the food bank. I usually volunteer at the organic farm. I was actually quite shocked, I didn't realise how difficult things are for people. It's not really far away but it is a different world."

"Here we all feel equal. We are all doing this task, collecting the potatoes and chatting about everything under the sun. We should have more of this."

The project is also starting to see more participants initiating activities, asking for events and becoming more experimental, enjoying the experience of *"seeing how things go"*.

Examples of events and activities

- The community farm on the Gower held a cook day as a way of bringing people together to foster relationships in a sociable way with no pressure or structure. There was lots of dancing and circumstantial connecting. This Twin want more days like this and are exploring ideas for an exchange visit in Swansea
- The community farm in Cornwall & Truro Food Bank enjoyed a tomato themed day with a pizza chef hosted by the farm. People who came shared their stories about tomatoes and had a go at making pizzas and tomato-themed crafts. *"We learned that pizza is a good,*

accessible vehicle for bringing people together – lots of talking points, how pizza is made in different places and by different people.”

The food bank is now trying to set up a community garden in Truro, and the farm is supporting them to know what to grow and how.

- Stroud community farm have been holding growing sessions over the last few months in Stroud, which led to families getting involved in growing things over the summer in their own estates in Bristol. This Twin aims to have a shared meal with produce grown together. They have also been having photovoice sessions to capture activities, experiences and outcomes.

“I’ve lived in the UK for a long time but I have never been to a farm. I have seen countryside on the telly. But we all live our lives near our flats you know. We have everything we need there. I was really interested to go to the farm. I had never seen a pig before. So big! I wondered whether wild animals would eat the cows left unattended in the field. The vegetables were really good. We cooked them together. So much better than what we find in the shops. We have got interested in growing food now. We have little gardens but we don’t know what to do with them.”

Reflecting on what helps these events to happen so that connections emerge, the project lead identified four main enablers:

- Key people** - dynamic, overworked, committed people – often women - who believe in their work, who keep going. This is key. The people involved have dogged determination, they stand up for their communities, are empathetic, believe in equality. They’re working magic in challenging environments. A few people become 'bridges' for their communities because they can look in two directions and speak the language of both communities (sometimes they are literally bilingual, other times they are socially able in more than one situation).
- Resources and a clear purpose** - funding brings or adds capacity as well as money to pay for opportunities and events that can bring people together. It also means we can show what’s possible and what’s changing e.g. funding the evaluation skills and capacity from Photovoice.
- Time** - there are numerous benefits of having a longer timeframe, including the room to make and learn from mistakes. The Lottery are good at enabling this. Our existing relationship with the Lottery was important – they are an intelligent funder. They understand communities, that it takes time. We are confident in them, we wouldn’t have embarked on this project without that.

- iv. Working with **organisations that are already very well embedded in their particular communities**. Bringing those organisations together makes it possible for their communities to find each other too.

Challenges for Twinning and BPT

Funding and connections through BPT have brought the above three elements to the Twinning project, but those involved are also aware of some of the key challenges involved for Twinning partners and project leads:

- Each Twin is made up of small organisations and/or groups, some of whom lack internal or organisational capacity. Some of the really small organisations and groups need support but RFT do not want to take over. *“How and when to step in and provide direction is a tricky balancing act.”*
- It is difficult to predict whether pairs will work longer term, especially given that none of them knew each other at the start and come from very different backgrounds and circumstances. The matching process carefully considered a number of diverse aspects, and some pairs are “uneven” in size and capacity. *“They don’t have to be evenly matched, it’s more nuanced than that”. “The initial pairings were a bit of a gamble. We didn’t know whether they would be able to work together.”*
- RFT’s project team is also small, and being available to support Twins’ activities takes time. *“It has felt like there’s a mismatch between aspiration and reality at times, taking account of the challenging environments that people are living in”*. If you’re busy day to day running a food bank, it is a big ask to also invest in a relationship with a farm.
- RFT believe there is an inherent challenge in the structure of the project, where they set the criteria and hold the grant, and it is up to Twinning partners to deliver and achieve the desired impacts. They don’t want to control what happens, *“but that can pose a challenge in project management terms when you have to ensure impact is achieved for the funding received”*. The project provides new opportunities for all of the projects. But it is also demanding.

These challenges are inherent to community work of this nature and while they are real, the benefits and opportunities significantly outweigh these difficulties. So far, 18 months into the project, there are a number of benefits, signs of change and personal as well as community impacts that can be observed.

RFT are working with evaluators experienced in facilitating Photovoice sessions with diverse participants, and some of this work has started to happen. Participants involved so far have found the experience to be interesting and surprising, and they enjoy sharing and discussing photographs they have taken during different activities and events.

Early signs of change / impact

The most consistent feedback from individuals and organisations involved in the project is that people have enjoyed their experiences so far and found them both interesting and surprising. Examples include:

Individual moments for individual people

Providing opportunities for people to make new connections is a key objective and also a key change. The project is exploring what happens as a result of making these connections. For example: *“seeing two people who would not normally come across or approach each other, laughing their heads off, cooking together, example of a teenage boy, quite isolated and unmotivated who is now engaged, contributing and enjoying it, hearing his mother sharing this and feeling proud”*.

It is at this individual or micro level that some of the key shifts can be seen, and are very powerful: *“teenagers from farming community talking with a 40 year old man met via the food bank and talking together about a Youtuber they all follow who is saving bees. These unexpected points of connection are showing us we’re all people at the end of the day”*.

Ripple effect of opportunities and activities

Relationships, visits and events are leading to people volunteering and for some, paid work. For example, NOW in Northern Ireland is supporting two volunteers who are asylum seekers to become accredited trainers and secure paid work. The twinning arrangement has also provided an opportunity for volunteering in NOW’s offices and on the community farm.

“It was a great opportunity to network, one of the participants now has the possibility of work experience at the farm because of this event.”

There is also important learning for the partners involved in the Twinning project; all organisations have learnt a great deal already, in ways that they could not have envisaged at the start.

“The Somali Kitchen came from the city to our small town and put on a film as part of our film festival. It sold out. The audience was 100% white. We ate Somali food together at the beginning, they cooked for us. I think everyone felt very welcoming and the women were quite brave and spoke to us from the front at the end. We could ask questions about their lives and culture. It was really interesting. I realised how little I actually know.”

Connection leading to greater sense of safety and belonging, and to mutual support

“We need to acknowledge the good protective work that is happening.”

People who rely on food banks and those involved in community farms are from different worlds and yet they are showing that it is possible to have good points of connection.

“From our event, it was clear that people seem to want the same things in life, whatever their background or lifestyle. People want to experience inclusion, a community feeling and comfort.” Truro Food Bank (from year 1 report)

NOW in Northern Ireland is an organisation that supports people who are neurodiverse or have a learning disability. Their twinned community farm offers the same and there is learning from and on both sides. Peaceful visits to the community farm show there is welcome and a soothing spaces in rural areas as well.

Members of each Twin shared examples of support within their communities over the summer of 2024 when far right riots and violent disturbances affected many towns and cities. Twinning partners showed their concern for each other’s safety, reaching out and offering practical and emotional support including food parcels from community farms and offers of transport to and from events.

‘We were worried about our new friends when we saw the riots on the TV in the city. There was nothing going on here in the countryside. But it did suddenly feel relevant because we knew people affected. We really wanted them to know that most people want them to feel safe. We sent cards and cakes.’

What are the key lessons (so far)?

Leave space to see what emerges – and expect the unexpected

“(we’re) doing things we couldn’t have predicted at the beginning, if we’d been more prescriptive it wouldn’t be working in the same way, not doing what communities value.”

Being community/twin led means that Twinning continually evolves and adapts to deliver what people decide is needed and wanted. Remaining open, flexible and curious are key features of this work.

“One of the farms that is very rural had asylum seekers volunteering on the farm. They were practising their English and it gave them something to do whilst they couldn’t work. They’re now in employment, in training groups to train and support people with a learning disability. An organisation that was predominantly white now has people who are asylum seekers in their office.”

Who are you reaching and not reaching?

“You can engage and work with people who show up but many people are not present.... reach out, keep asking.....”

Twinning has confirmed RFT’s understanding that many people’s lives become very small and insular as a result of poverty and hardship; and as a consequence they are not benefiting from opportunities to participate or from coming together. *Poverty can lead to separation and real isolation.* A major lesson is to always keep in mind and keep asking ‘who is not here?’

What next?

Twinning is at the half-way mark and has another two years of activity ahead. They are therefore moving into that tricky mid-point of a project's life cycle, where the initial excitement shifts and all those involved move into maintenance mode to maintain day to day delivery.

The project continues to be led by communities and each Twin, so to a certain extent it is difficult to predict too much what will happen or share a detailed schedule: *we can only look as far ahead as the delivery partners look.*

At the same time, everyone involved is keen to keep connecting, hosting more events and co-designing more activities. They also want to do more on learning and capturing stories as ways of understanding their impacts, for example through Photovoice.

RFT also want to understand more about which interventions lead to interaction, in order for relationships to happen when people come together. *Most people do things with people they already or have always known or who are familiar. We need to be more humble, more brave to go to new situations, meet as equals, understand each other, we need to go very deep. It's very rewarding and beneficial but often doesn't happen.*

The Twinned organisations are starting to develop more serious joint projects which they didn't think of at the beginning. For example a food bank wants to set up a garden to grow their own veg in their town. One pair wants to set up a vocational apprenticeship for refugees that is based on both horticulture and catering. One group wants to improve access to nature in the city where their community live.