

VRIENDENTUINEN

How to create a learning community to develop a resilient food-aid system?



January- April 2022
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Contents

1) Introduction	2
I. Research questions	2
2) Stakeholders' motivations	4
I. Vriendentuinen	4
II. Food gardens.....	6
III. Food bank.....	7
IV. Other organisations.....	8
V. Concluding.....	9
3) Learning network for agricultural food-aid.....	10
I. Learning network	10
II. Concluding.....	11
4) Elements for a resilient food-aid system	12
I. Essential elements.....	12
II. Activity support	14
III. Concluding.....	14
5) Conclusion and Discussion.....	15
I. Conclusion	15
II. Recommendations	16
References	19

1) Introduction

Vriendentuinen as a concept has been started and developed in 2015 by Stichting Fondsenbeheer Landbouw en Zorg (SFLZ). For a Scienceshop project, a research has been set up with Vriendentuinen research pilots since 2021. Originally, the goal was to have care farmers delivering fresh products as fruits, vegetables and eggs to food banks, which are typically short in supply, especially in terms of fresh foods (e.g. vegetables) and even more since a growing number of people is in need of food assistance. Care farmers work alongside persons with disabilities to ensure that they have a productive day. This societal function is the most prevalent in care farming, and it is about adding social value (Potze et al., 2021). The concept of Vriendentuinen has given value to a variety of themes, including supplying local fresh items to individuals on food assistance and meaningful daily activities for care farmers and their participants.

The keys to success of Vriendentuinen were deepened in previous researches, pointing at the three functions of care farms (Potze et al., 2021). Besides these being health care and agriculture, a third one of societal function is brought to light. This societal function is about the involvement of the community: local people can come for education, children's activities and getting familiar with agriculture. This participation of the local community is a value that nowadays becomes increasingly valuable. The need of the connection with nature and the value of local contacts are combined in this. Care farms are more than only health care and agriculture (Potze et al., 2021).

Stichting Fondsenbeheer Landbouw en Zorg (2018) indicated several difficulties. All participating care farmers clearly stated that they do not have time or attention to find or contact other care farmers to enthuse each other, which makes it difficult to start a network. Also there is a lack of volunteers, especially ones that are willing to take coordinating roles and for example can help coordinate communication and connections with other organisations, but also volunteers with knowledge about for example financial systems are missing. The little amount of promotion could be a reason behind this lack of volunteers, one that might easily be solved (Potze et al., 2021). Other obstacles regard the food-aid channels, there is a need for better exchange with them and building a connection with them, becoming a give and take relation. This should include a connection with the local food-aid receiving community, since there is a need to understand food preferences to potentially adapt the products. Thus, collaboration between food-aid organizations and care farms is seen as a mutual solution where everyone benefits.

As an outcome of their literature research and interviews with stakeholders, Potze et al. (2021) recommendations' include a greater emphasis on a community and a bigger network. Such a network can function as a learning network and could exist of multiple care farmers with Vriendentuinen, but also other types of food-aid such as food gardens who are based on volunteers mostly. In addition, more food-aid organisations are needed, with professionals to primarily obtain a better understanding of the opportunities and problems of connecting food-aid organisations with care farmers.

I. Research questions

The problem illustrated above, leads to the following aim of this current project; to initiate a learning network around Vriendentuinen and include other stakeholders as well. The purpose of such a network is to form a community to facilitate and support the current Vriendentuinen and build from there. When a larger and broader stakeholder group joins, the network can be expanded. The goal is

to achieve a qualitative network for a resilient food-aid system. Individual (care) farms and gardens can become more resilient if the network works together.

The main question for this project is the following:

How can we initiate a learning network where stakeholders co-develop (novel) forms of supported food aid (e.g. Vriendentuinen) in order to make the food-aid system more resilient?

This is divided in the following sub-questions, which will form the leading thread of this report as well.

- 1) What are the experiences and added value of a learning network for different stakeholders of (novel) forms of supported food aid?
- 2) How can a learning network for different stakeholders be build and what form, information and exchange can be the added value for them?
- 3) What are the essential elements that must be present in order to co-develop a more resilient food-aid system?

2) Stakeholders' motivations

When initiating a learning network, it is necessary to address the stakeholders that can play a role in it. The ones which are considered that can bring value to it and gain from it, are described in this chapter. After literature was studied and different parties were interviewed, the most important stakeholders are considered to be: Vriendentuinen, food gardens, and foodbanks. These three stakeholders are examined below, including their possible motivation to develop this network, their experiences, added value, difficulties, and potential expectations from this network. This is specified for each stakeholder in the following paragraphs. Then, a group of 'other stakeholders' with inspiring organisations is considered as well.

I. Vriendentuinen

Added value

One of the important stakeholders are care farms with Vriendentuinen. The original concept was for care farmers to deliver fresh fruits, vegetables and eggs to food banks, as these are items that are typically in short supply. Care farmers work with disabled people ensuring that they have a productive day. The three valuable functions of care farms include health care, agriculture and a societal function, involving the community (Elings & Hassink, 2008). Motivations retrieved from interviews showed that care farms with Vriendentuinen are very motivated to expand their organisations, while also expanding their goals and dreams. They touch upon the necessity they feel to contribute more and help more people. Being able to contribute to providing food to people with minimal income brings them fulfilment. Also the combination with their own participants, and the feeling for them to contribute to society in even more valuable ways, makes this combination worth it for the care farmers.

Difficulties

However, there are issues and difficulties within Vriendentuinen. One main point for improvement is considered to be regarding promotion of the project to attract sponsors, a central route for seeds and plants. Some stakeholders suggested the need for a brand, to make communication to surrounding organisations and stakeholders easier. Also, this lack of promotion should improve with a better definition of the concept, more promotion can lead to a better organising body behind this concept. This promotion should, according to Potze et al. (2021), make a wider community aware of the concept and care farmers' activities, hopefully attracting new volunteers. For all this it is considered to use a paid coordinator to prevent being dependent on volunteers. This alternative brings advantages, but might be difficult to finance.

Another problem that arises for a better maintained project, is the connection with the foodbanks. More help is needed in involving and collaborating with the foodbanks. When their involvement is low, it results in a lower efficiency and lower motivation from the care farmers' side. Potentially, foodbanks' clients can be used in this, there is a lot of possibility in them which is not used optimally yet. For example, they can help by becoming volunteers at the care farm, helping with the societal goal and have a meaningful addition, with for example picking up the products. Or another example could be support from foodbanks in the form of seeds and plants (Potze et al., 2021).

Other difficulties can be found as well on the more logistic side. The lack of time, volunteers, regional collaboration, and financial support are the most significant difficulties (Potze et al., 2021). A collaboration between food aid channels and care farms is perceived to be a solution and win-win situation. Another part of the problem lies in the financing of the project, it is difficult for care farmers to maintain profit. A lot of motivation is necessary to keep on going with the project when financially there is no profit to be made.

Role in Network

The care farms are the current key element in the concept and should become a central part of the learning network. Being part of this network for them will be helpful for knowing other organisations with (partly) the same goals and getting inspired by their methods and experiences. It might help them to further develop the Vriendentuin into a more resilient system on the care farm.

Several parties from Vriendentuinen were interviewed, in order to investigate their experiences, inspiration, potential motivation to build the network and their added value of being part of the learning network. Most of the parties are motivated to develop this network to inspire, learn from, and trade experiences with others, which is required to build the network amongst all stakeholders. Some of the parties expressed their drive and excitement to begin constructing the network and connecting all the parties. They have already started working on ways to increase communication. Some care farms and organizations, on the other hand, have their own network and method of communication, and they are not interested in expanding it, nor investing time and energy in a network.

Furthermore, there is a variety of systems and strategies for the Vriendentuinen and this diversity will play a positive role in this network. Inspiration and exchange knowledge and will help parties to learn from each other. For example, one of the farms from Gelderland have the Vriendentuin going for a longer time already, they have a system where they sell food packages to local buyers, which profits are used to cover the costs for the Vriendentuin. This farm is an environment to work, study, and enjoy agricultural and rural life. Internships and contract jobs are also available, they reach a wide variety of people and with all their different activities they will be inspiring for all other gardens. Contrasting, another Vriendentuin, located in province of Utrecht is currently struggling to get financially stable when providing food to the foodbank for free. Becoming part of the network, they can for example use inspiration from the farm in Gelderland and alternatively provide customers who already buy food packages from their farm the option to donate one extra when they do so. Alternatively raise the price of the ones they sell and let the community foot the bill. The income from the food packages can be used to purchase seeds and materials for (future) food aid projects. This system is a good instance for other organization and make them strong and keep them running.

There are also other examples of Vriendentuinen, that receive foundation from a variety of sources, such as municipalities and day-care centres. Combining all different foundations sources expands the possibilities. One specific farm can currently support 50% of all food aid recipients in Doetinchem. Furthermore, rather than being donated to a food bank, lost food boxes are now given to families for free. They want to take a more social approach by first figuring out what type of food aid people want and need, and then coming up with solutions and production strategies to suit those requirements. Their accomplishments can be inspiring for other Vriendentuinen, and this will be a step in the right direction.

These many farms undoubtedly have differing perspectives on the network. On the one hand, some believe it will be advantageous for Vriendentuinen to grow and build a long-term network by involving companies, government, and all stakeholders in order to improve and expand the concept. A few of the interviewed people on the other hand, believe that keeping the network small and local will assist more in building the bond. As a result, they are all keen to further expand the concept and facilitate communication between parties, but their techniques to constructing the network and their aspirations for it might differ.

II. Food gardens

Added value

Food gardens differentiate in size and are present in many municipalities. They are fully based on volunteers and donations and the harvest is largely production for foodbanks. A stable number of longer-term volunteers seem to be especially important for the smoothness of the garden. Food gardens are self-organised, with one or multiple 'leaders' who give the food garden structure. At the same time, people who voluntary work there are a huge source of labour and knowledge power. It all comes together in the power of the volunteers. In turn, for the volunteers the food gardens are of extremely added value, in terms of social activities, useful work, and connecting with nature.

Difficulties

Food gardens have also their difficulties, such as the lack of volunteers and the need of more funds to help them expand and grow. They are strongly dependent on donations and gifts. Also, the biggest challenge is in the wishes of food-aid receivers and ultimately foodbanks, and the link with their food donation. This supply and demand does not always go smoothly, as a result of the combination of difficulties from these various angles.

Role in Network

Being part of the network could help food gardens grow and gain more knowledge about different topics, as finding new volunteers but also more practical agricultural topics. Making connections with other parties and interactive communication will help them to solve their problems and learn from other parties' new skills. In turn, food gardens initially form a nice inspiration for a good working system of volunteers, agriculture, and food aid. They can be a useful part of the network, since they have experience in many angles, including volunteers, funding, community building, and contact with the foodbank. Without officially being specialised in care, they often have a high social impact. In return, the output they can gain is the network, in which they can be inspired by other food gardens, and Vriendentuinen, in angles that can improve their work.

Two different food gardens were visited and interviewed to gain information about their experiences, difficulties, and motivations to be part of the network. One of them is located in Gelderland, they have a quite big food garden, about 70 active volunteers. Their system is special, since they give 50% of the harvest to the volunteers, and the other 50% to the foodbank. Everyone working there is a volunteer, including the coordinators and organisations. They put quite some effort in advertisement or open days, which might be interesting to inspire other stakeholders. They showed interest to learn from network: more the farmer side, they do want to have more knowledge on some points. In addition, since this food garden is clearly resilient, it implies that there is human capital and an appropriate network with stakeholders. This can be an inspiration for the learning network.

Another food garden is located in Utrecht, it is a relatively smaller food garden, coordinated by a volunteer from the foodbank. By chance, some people with special needs worked there and got positive experiences. The system they have regarding contact with the foodbank sounds ideal; once a week they have contact about the amounts of products they can deliver and the depot even adapts the delivery to the distribution centre on it. The volunteers appreciate that they can work at their own pace. It is light work, but if something heavy needs to be done, the coordinator communicates it to his strong volunteers. He looks at what people like to do the most (harvesting makes them most proud), so he searches for options that the people like best. It also has a meditative aspect, the coordinator thinks that gardens like his attract a specific target group. He finds it interesting to see what kind of people come there, he gets motivated by observing how the conversations get going between two people that are harvesting beans for hours. These are all elements to use and communicate about in a learning network, providing inspiration for others.

III. Food bank

Added value

In the Netherlands, there are 171 food banks, which provided free supplies to 160,500 people last year (Dutch News.nl, 2021). The number of people who need help from food banks in the Netherlands increased by 7.2 percent last year, according to the national organization (Jose, 2021). Clients increased the most in the region of Noord-Holland and Rotterdam, and the organization expects an even further rise in 2021. Last year, the government donated €4 million to food banks, anticipating an increase in demand because of the coronavirus outbreak. However, because food banks depend on donations from stores and restaurants, most of the money has yet to be spent (Jose, 2021).

In the Netherlands food aid is nationally organized, but locally planned and specially organized for each region. There are bigger depots and smaller distribution centres, all connected and managed by volunteers. They all have their own ways of working, receiving products from different local food suppliers. One local foodbank in Gelderland for example, visits different supermarkets, restaurants, farmers, markets etc, multiple times a week to pick up leftover foods themselves. They sort it and distribute it themselves. There is also an online web shop where donating people can specifically donate money for specific products. Everything is based on volunteers and there is never a shortage of them. This illustrates that every foodbank has their own ways of working and their own innovative manners in developing the system.

Difficulties

For foodbanks the goal is to obtain as much food as possible, with the highest quality possible. Foodbanks have the role of distributing food, therefore they are searching for food donors constantly. While at the same time supermarkets and others are trying to reduce their food waste, foodbanks depend on them. The foodbanks are in need of new sources, therefore food gardens and care farms can have a more dominant role in the food-aid system. However, foodbanks always maintain dependent on waste streams.

Role in Network

Foodbanks are considered a key stakeholder, since they are distributing the products and potentially can be the centre of the system. Moreover, the importance of their role in society is increasing, as mentioned above. They are a very important player in the food-aid system, but their point of view is totally different since it is not focused on production. Therefore their perspective is different, their

goals are also different and the communication will need to be clear and strong to keep the relations good and fruitful between them. This implies a difficulty for the network; different stakeholders have different motivations and goals, which makes it complicated to work on the essential elements together. On the one hand this can result in a variety of input and a diverged system, for example this might result in a development where foodbank volunteers will help on the production side of the system. On the other hand it can be difficult to maintain this variety of input in the system.

Moreover, different foodbanks having diverse ways of organising, which could be an inspiration for the network. Besides the pick-up system and the web shop in Gelderland mentioned before, a particular foodbank in Rotterdam for example has a grocery store. This system allows for irregular flows of fresh foods from farmers, which makes it suitable for Vriendentuinen as well. Food aid clients can choose from the 'grocery store' what they want, it is not a problem if more or less is brought. These are inspirational systems for other foodbanks in the learning network.

Regarding the logistic system, every foodbank communicates differently with the food providing organisations. According to the interviewees, the farms deliver fresh vegetables and fruits to the food bank which then they deliver the food packages to food aid receivers. Some foodbanks sometimes also help the farms with volunteers and some of them donate seeds and other products. Thus, some foodbanks are more assertive, some are more passive. This differs per region, implying that the food garden or care farm has to adapt to this, resulting in irritations in some places and fluent contact in other places. The learning network could be helpful for foodbanks since they are part of the process and will benefit from improving the concept and building this learning network. Especially now with an increasing number of people who need help from food banks in the Netherlands. Food banks could share their personal strategies and the food aid receivers' needs, which are important for the producing parties to know about as well.

IV. Other organisations

The network of food-aid organisations around was examined and some interesting findings grabbed attention. One organisation picks up food surpluses, to distribute it and cook meals with it for those needing support. The key is having partners that want to collaborate in the project and who are close to the target groups. Also, an inspiration towards short supply chain was looked at; one organisation combines locally produced food with recipes all in one box and sell this locally (Potze et al., 2021). Although this is not food aid, it does show how a short supply chain can be maintained, with a little help of included inspirational recipes.

Related to this, the concept of Boeren voor Buren also strives for a short supply chain between farmers and consumers. They focus on food aid by selling these boxes for a low price to people with a low income. This is more in the direction of Vriendentuinen, however the care farmer does not get any income from it. A way needs to be found where this can be sustained without any profit.

Furthermore, further in the process of consuming, community kitchen initiatives offer a perspective for combining sustainability with food aid. Leftovers from supermarkets are used in these kitchens to make nutritious meals for free or a low price. In these organisations volunteers are important, they are participating for their personal and professional development as well. This implies that it is in line with care farmers; they provide care for their clients and their development. Both are a holistic approach to food aid provision. Leftover food streams are transformed in nutritious meals for low-income people, a stream that is all about social value and sustainability. An example of a community

kitchen is Cascoland, a kitchen with a strong bond in the community. Many volunteers are enthusiastic and inspiring for recipes and new project ideas (Kooi, 2022). It shows that key to this organisation is an extensive network, a community build with a lot of time and effort. The network became stable because it was easily accessible for people to join and collaborate, leading to more partnerships and volunteers. Social value being spread out gives local people a reason to become part of the network. The inclusion of everyone combined with shared responsibilities for everyone part of the horizontal network makes this a very interesting organisation that a system around Vriendentuinen and other types of food-aid can inspire from.

V. Concluding

To answer the sub-question: *“What are the experiences and added value of a learning network for different stakeholders of (novel) forms of supported food aid?”* the stakeholders were listed. The main stakeholders include Vriendentuinen, food gardens, foodbanks, and ‘other’ types of food-aid organisations. They all bring their own expertise, difficulties and added value to a learning network. Vriendentuinen are the key stakeholder with many experiences in care and farming, and difficulties to get inspiration for, concerning topics as organisation, finance and promotion. Food gardens in turn have more experience in community building and volunteers, and can obtain more knowledge about farming in return. The foodbanks are at the moment inevitable as well, they can learn from each other about ways to handle new types of food-aid for practicalities. In the network they can correspond with distributors about practicalities such as delivery and pick-up. Other organisations can over time add inspiration and innovative ideas to develop both the food-aid system and the network.

3) Learning network for agricultural food-aid

I. Learning network

First and foremost, what is a learning network? A learning network can be characterized in a variety of ways, but it always boils down to the same thing: a network that benefits stakeholders who cannot be reached on their own (Davis, 2013). A professional/personal learning networks (PLN) is a self-selected network of stakeholders from various fields who share common interests in terms of sharing ideas, inspiration, resources, support, and collaboration, with the goal of improving professional and personal learning (Davis, 2013). In the end the individual goal is to seek knowledge, by asking questions and finding added resources through this network.

A learning network around Vriendentuinen can benefit all participating stakeholders. Concerning the food-aid learning network there are recommendations made by previous researches, including more focus on a community and a broader network. This implies the need for more stakeholders, including Vriendentuinen, food gardens, foodbanks, and in time also other food-aid organisations. They contribute to the network in diverse ways, focusing on inspiration and sharing experiences. More insights from experts on food aid are necessary, mainly to gain more insights on opportunities and challenges of connecting with care farmers (Potze et al., 2021; Bosman et al., 2021). They state that there is a lack of organised communication and a need for involvement of the wider community. For this group a learning network would mean a community of stakeholders who are in contact to help and inspire each other. This could result in the development of a more resilient food-aid system.

Purpose

The purpose of the Scienceshop project is to improve Vriendentuinen's resilience with a focus on extending the concept and building networks. Vriendentuinen has been in operation for several years, and several researches implied the need for a network: support is required to create a community, a network of stakeholders with whom they can connect and collaborate, to make the move from "only a concept" to "an actual organization" (Bosman et al., 2021, p.5). The concept of Vriendentuinen is extremely useful, and it has a few distinct characteristics that should be preserved. From agriculture and sustainability ideals, to social worth and compassion, there is something for everyone. Regarding Vriendentuinen, being a part of this network will help them develop and improve their organisation, inspired by other groups that have similar aims, and share their techniques and triumphs. It could help Vriendentuinen to become a more resilient food-aid system by increasing public awareness of the concept and encouraging people to participate in and contribute to the procedure.

Steps

Several steps need to be taken to initiate this network, with first a definition of a common goal. As noticed during this research and the organised workshop, there is a need to define shared goals and interests. The different stakeholders have different organisations, diverse in size, target group, activities, and therefore also different perspectives and goals. Overlap needs to be found and defined to let stakeholders acknowledge the added value of a network together with these other stakeholders.

A next step is about sharing, to share experiences and ideas with each other, seeing where the main points for interest are. Conversations in smaller diverse groups can help find these main topics of interest. Also ideas need to be shared, about how to co-develop a network. For instance, how other

stakeholders can be reached and what events can be organised. The focus of sharing ideas should be on co-developing the network, and developing a resilient food-aid system.

Furthermore, more volunteers and sponsors are needed to keep the project running, thus the concept must be clear in order to promote it to other parties and the local community. Several other categories of stakeholders can inspire this process; therefore, the goal is to mix information and experiences from the diverse types of stakeholders. When larger and varying groups join, this network of stakeholders can be expanded, and the concept of Vriendentuinen can be expanded (and potentially renamed), resulting in a larger target audience. Individual farms and gardens can become more self-sufficient and resilient if the community works together.

Since the learning network should be based on exchange of knowledge and experiences, next steps should include organization of activities that make this exchange possible. For example events to brainstorm about more co-developing the network and next steps, but also exchanging knowledge and building a basis for shared goals and interests. Furthermore, a platform for communication is suggested as possibility to simplify mutual contacts. Such a platform includes possibilities to share experiences and inspiration, but also practical information about a variety of general topics. This platform will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

For this current project, a workshop was planned to get all the stakeholders together in order to start establishing the learning network. The purpose of this workshop is for the stakeholders to get to know each other and take the initial steps in forming the network, as well as to recognize the additional value in this network. In addition, this workshop could serve as a starting point for communication between stakeholders, experiencing what each of them brings and learns from such a network, and how the various perspectives add to the network's learning capacity. To make it a better foundation for the future, stakeholders should discover its value and benefits for themselves.

Added values

The various stakeholders gain different benefits from building this network, they all can benefit from it to grow and improve their organizations. For example, the network will help Vriendentuinen communicate with other organizations to gain knowledge from them so they can seek more volunteers and obtain funding from companies or organizations. Furthermore, food gardens contribute to the network because of their strong local community, so their role is valuable and can motivate other organizations. They can also learn more about the farmer side of things from the network; they would like to learn more about some detailed agriculture topics. Furthermore, the network benefits food banks, allowing them to get additional food to serve food aid recipients.

II. Concluding

Answering the sub-question: *“How can a learning network for different stakeholders be build and what form, information and exchange can be the added value for them?”* it is clear that building a learning network requires multiple steps. Key is to find shared goals and interests where all stakeholders can connect with. Most exchange should be focused on sharing experiences, inspiration and knowledge, on several topics. Steps also include organising events for brainstorm and sharing possibilities, as well as providing a platform for communication and information overviews.

4) Elements for a resilient food-aid system

Besides initiating a learning network, it is important to look at the goal of the network: a resilient food-aid system. Therefore this chapter focuses on the essential elements of such a system, and how these are in turn supported by the different stakeholders. Also possible activities supporting the network in co-developing the system are elaborated on.

I. Essential elements

Motivation

A food-aid system based on agriculture should include several elements to be able to be resilient. First of all, motivation from the stakeholders is an important one. Everything starts here, producers and distributors should be motivated to do this job. Regarding motivation of different stakeholders, interviews were conducted. Motivation is found on many different levels. A main motivation of the producers is to provide fresh fruit, vegetables and other farm products for people who are not able to offer enough food for their families and need help. In addition, volunteers have motivation on many aspects, for example communicating and having contact with their community and locals, while being in a green environment. Also some volunteers “earn” by getting some of the harvest, which keeps them motivated. Furthermore, on another level the social value of food-aid projects also motivates people to join. Especially for care farmers, they want to help people with special needs, their farm is an opportunity for them to add something positive to their community because of the big social impact of their care farms. Owners feel that their work is special and valuable. For the participants, the work there helps them to develop in for instance being able to function in society or get education. Concerning these care farms, it appeared that there are different types of care farms. They differ in terms of strategies, collaboration, services, but mainly initiators (Hassink, Grin & Hulsink, 2012). Care farms are mostly initiated by someone from the healthcare sector or the agricultural sector, both tend to have a different focus. This results in different activities on the care farm originated by different motivational aspects, which is not necessarily a problem, but only illustrates differences.

Inspiration

Another possible essential element is inspiration. Inspiration is currently mainly achieved by working together with each other. For example, volunteers on food gardens come from everywhere, they have different types of expertise and knowledge on different areas. They can inspire each other, by helping with different projects, asking each other questions and suggesting new things. In general this mutual communication leads to inspirational developments within organisations. Although the knowledge for inspiration comes from outside, it stays inside. It appears to be essential for a resilient system to be developing continuously, and inspiring each other also outside the organisation is an important element in this. Besides the key stakeholders, other types of food-aid organisations can fill a role as inspiration. They might have innovative ideas in their organisation, providing inspiration on several areas for several stakeholders. The link with a learning network is easily drawn; the more connections made, the better the inspirational communication.

Community

A third element that could be essential for a resilient food-aid system are the connections with the locals. A local community is key for a good basis of contacts, leading to a better atmosphere, more volunteers and more sponsors. Care farms are often connected with the local community. Sometimes

they have a farmer shop to sell their products where local buyers come, or they have possibilities for other (group) activities on their area. The connection with the local community includes connection with food-aid receivers as well, an extra stakeholder. This can in turn be helpful to understand their needs better. As retrieved from interviews, it appeared that most people are aware of the necessity to eat fresh vegetables and, just as for other people, they also prefer pre-cleaned and pre-cut vegetables. This results in a more complicated situation since food-aid receivers feel the need to be grateful (Andriessen, 2022). Therefore a relation with also this part of the community is essential.

Public Relations

In addition, related to community building, good PR (public relations) plays a role in this. It is considered helpful to have a concrete concept or 'brand' that can be used as overarching name for the food-aid system, to attract people more easily. The communication outside can be about information, activities, goals, and especially about the societal value of the organisation. Also for instance open days contribute to the PR image, providing a positive public image, which increases a connection with locals and helps connecting with other organisations for a food-aid system.

Development

Another element concerns the constant flow of development and evolvement. A resilient food-aid system should be able to adapt constantly to social pressure and developments from society. Pressures from the landscape about for example social systems or laws can change any moment. A fluent system is therefore necessary. To illustrate, the system around care farming has been developing and changing for a long time, where care farms adapted and changed around it, resulting in a more resilient system. For example, it appeared that social attention helped in increasing volunteers, clients and possibly also donations (Hassink, Hulsink & Grin, 2014). This implies narrow contacts with the community around the care farms, it was something that developed in the system over time.

Diversity

A last element necessary for a resilient system, includes the diversity of the stakeholder group as mentioned before. A broader group will include several different organisations, who each can offer something special to this food-aid system. They all can contribute with exchanging knowledge and inspiration, to help each other producing more. For this, a well-described definition of a concept of 'Vriendentuinen' or another name can be precisely given, however this definition should be flexible enough to overarch a differing group of organisations that (can) provide food-aid in different ways. Different food-aid organisations should join the learning network in time, focusing on different ways of food-aid. This will result in innovation and inspiration in the network. Besides, the broad group of stakeholders should be connected into a network, an overarching organisation that supports the upcoming ideas. It appeared from studies that for example the amount of care farmers increased a lot after them became a bit more structure with organisations and foundations that attracted attention and supported with funding (Hassink, Hulsink & Grin, 2014). It might be valuable to consider an organisation behind the concept of Vriendentuinen, a leader role that provides structure to the concept and the arising diversity of projects.

All mentioned elements and supporting stakeholders are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Essential elements with stakeholder support

Essential element	Vriendentuin	Food garden	Foodbank	Other food-aid organisations	Food-aid receivers
<i>Motivation</i>	X	X	X		
<i>Inspiration</i>	X	X		X	
<i>Local community</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Good PR</i>	X	X		X	
<i>Development</i>	X	X		X	
<i>Diversitiy</i>	X	X	X	X	X

II. Activity support

For support of the essential elements (e.g. motivation, inspiration) it is helpful to organize several activities, such as workshops and events. This can support connections among stakeholders and co-development in the learning network. As shown in the past, for example a meeting organised to gather several food gardens together and get them in contact, helped them receive insights from similar organisations (Oomen, 2021). Interactive sessions bring the group together in a brainstorm mode, helping each other out. Also it was implied that workshops have the goal and ability to show diversity and similarity (Oomen, 2021; Barot et al., 2019).

In this current project also a workshop was planned, to get all the stakeholders together in order to start establishing the learning network. The purpose of this workshop was for the stakeholders to get to know each other and take the initial steps in forming the network, as well as to recognize the additional value in this network. In addition, the workshop tried to serve as a starting point for communication between stakeholders and to examine what each of them can contribute and gain from such a network, and how these various perspectives can add to the network's learning capacity. A goal was to let stakeholders discover experience its value and benefits for themselves.

Other events that can be organised to help the co-developing in the network, are for example themed events. Since each stakeholder has a different viewpoint with different ambitions and priorities, it is key to invest in themed events. Every theme can attract a different marbled group of stakeholders from the network, and there is room for everyone to join events as wished for. Examples of themes include: finding/binding volunteers, organic gardening, logistics and financial systems. Events could be organized on the locations of care farms or food gardens, to include a little tour for extra inspiration, resulting in a better connection for co-developing.

III. Concluding

In short, answering the subquestion: *What are the essential elements that must be present in order to co-develop a more resilient food-aid system?* The essential elements include motivation, inspiration, connections with the community, good PR, a broad diverse network and a constant level of development. All stakeholders contribute in this on a different level and from a different perspective, having different goals and ambitions. In the end the essential elements should be extensively filled by all stakeholders in their own way, building on a co-developing community behind the food-aid system.

5) Conclusion and Discussion

I. Conclusion

The objective of this current project was to initiate a learning network around Vriendentuinen for a resilient food-aid system. From previous research it appeared that Vriendentuinen as they are now are not resilient because of a diversity of problems, mainly related to organisation, time and financial logistics. The learning network has as purpose to support current Vriendentuinen and build from here. A more diverse group of stakeholders is expected to be able to expand the network, to achieve a qualitative network of stakeholders working together for a resilient-food system. Therefore the research question was: *“How can we initiate a learning network where stakeholders co-develop (novel) forms of supported food aid (e.g. Vriendentuinen in order to make the food-aid system more resilient?)”*

Summarizing, several conclusions can be drawn. First of all, from literature, interviews, and the workshop that was organized to get insights for the network, it appeared to be difficult to draw general conclusions, a returning topic since the concept is not specified enough as well. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is important to find something where stakeholders agree on that that is their common ground. During the organized workshop the focus for common ground was put on providing food aid in the end. This could function as a common goal, which is important for the connection and therefore for building the network. A related conclusion is that stakeholders inherently are differing a lot. Stakeholders have different ways of doing their activities, their organisations are different in size, different in target group, and they are differently motivated with different goals and different priorities. These differences are partly based on the care farms target group. During the workshop it appeared that on a daily basis for the care farmers the participants are the most crucial. The target group is vital in terms of possibilities; what is possible in the organization or on the care farm is determined by how young/old they are and what their specific requirements are. For new skills other members of the network are required to assist in accomplishing this goal on time.

These differences consequently results in different perspectives on the network as well. Some believe it will be advantageous for Vriendentuinen to grow and build a long-term network by involving companies, government, and all stakeholders in order to improve and expand the concept. Others want to keep the network small and local, with a stronger bond. As a result, they are all keen to further expand the concept and facilitate communication between parties, but their techniques to constructing the network and their aspirations for it differ. This has consequences for the recommendations, which will be mentioned below.

To answer the research question: *“How can we initiate a learning network where stakeholders co-develop (novel) forms of supported food aid (e.g. Vriendentuinen) towards a more resilient food-aid system?”*, it is important to see and value the variety in stakeholders. Initiating a learning network requires effort to connect the different stakeholders and help them to find common goals. This should be the basis for a network, while simultaneously leaving space to be different and unique in terms of organisation and ambitions. Different stakeholders are Vriendentuinen, care farms, food gardens, foodbanks, and potentially other food-aid organisation. The stage of co-developing starts with essential elements in the network, including motivation, inspiration, community, development, and a broad network. Sharing experiences around these elements creates co-development opportunities, and events will help in the developing stage, sharing and growing knowledge.

II. Recommendations

Several recommendations can be made. First of all, to approach the learning network, the basis of the network is suggested to focus on food gardens and Vriendentuinen first. Care farms who are already having a Vriendentuin should connect with each other and with food gardens. The initial connection is food-aid, with kind of similar activities already. There are basic elements that they can inspire each other on, which will illustrate them the potentials in a bigger and broader network as well. Later, the foodbank can start fulfilling a bigger role, for example when local foodbank coordinators get in contact with each other and the network. For this a focus point is to determine what they can gain from the network as well. Moreover, in later stages other food-aid organisations can join, making the network even broader and varying in activities and ambitions.

As overarching focus recommendation, it is important to acknowledge that the bottom-up strategies that are mostly wished for, are probably not enough. Relying on initiative from the stakeholders only, requires a lot of motivation and determination from them. This has faded a bit in the last couple of years. Therefore it is recommended to combine the bottom-up strategies with a little organisation from the top. Supporting or coordinating activities from for instance Federatie Landbouw en Zorg could help setting up the network with a bit more foundation.

In addition, follow-up activities should be organized regularly (e.g. monthly), with the focus on different themes. As mentioned earlier, different stakeholders have different goals and priorities, and therefore different needs for knowledge. Events as open days, informative workshops, or inspirational meetings, should differ in theme every time, so that no stakeholder is excluded and everyone can choose themselves where to go or what can be useful. Also general meetings should be organized, where the theme is to build connections with each other and informally meet and exchange experiences. In September a big event will be organized for care farmers, which can function as a good start for the network.

Platform

To build and maintain a learning network it is also considered to be helpful to have a platform. This was mentioned in different meetings during this project and it seems that everyone agrees that a somehow a platform can be helpful. Although, about the form and content of this platform there are many different opinions. This confirms the thought that there is not one perfect formula for a network nor a platform. Different needs for each stakeholder imply that a platform should try to catch all these needs into one place, making it possible for different ambitions to visit the platform and become part of the network, that there is something for everyone. Our suggestion therefore includes the following:

The platform should be a website with different possibilities, which can be an elaboration on Vriendentuinen.nl or something new. Firstly, the stakeholders should be able to get to know each other. For this interaction, there first is a homepage where news will be presented. Here every stakeholder can upload activities or news that has happened in their organisation. Also an agenda is provided, to give an overview of the coming meeting events or open days. It is also possible to have contact by posting on this news page in the form of a forum. Interaction is possible by reacting on each other. Besides, a map is provided where all participating stakeholders can be found. This makes it possible to see where other organisations are located, including potentially contact data to call each other and ask questions.

Furthermore, there should be themes with information on several topics. These include also links to other websites with detailed information on agricultural topics. Here basic information about sowing, seeds, and soil is provided, but also practical sides of how to get these seeds and materials via sponsors or horticultures. In addition, techniques of how users might start with a garden, what are the processes to find land and make it suitable and profitable, but also related to a step plan including financial tips. Moreover, organizational types and company strategies are elaborated upon, including how to obtain financial assistance or other tips to get financially stable. This also includes tips for activities, a PR related activity plan with suggestions for open days and others. Also organisation specific topics are addressed, such as finding/binding volunteers, but also broader themes as contact with the foodbank and how to find sponsors will pique the interest of all parties. In general, for each of these themes there are practical tips given, just normal information. Also, there is an inspirational part, where other stakeholders from the network give their experience, in a written story or a video. This will help pass over the motivation and passion of the stakeholder, being able to inspire on differing themes based on their own practices. If possible, also per theme a contact form or phone number is provided, to ask specific questions. It should be developed still who is responsible for this and responding to the questions, it can be for instance a farmer or a volunteer. In general, it is critical for the platform to cover all of these different themes so that everyone can discover something they're interested in. To illustrate the idea, a mock-up draft version (in Dutch) is shown in Figure 1 to 3.

In general, more steps are necessary to achieve a learning network with different stakeholders in a network. Further research might be helpful, focusing on how to motivate all different stakeholders in different ways to become a co-developing part of the resilient food-aid system.

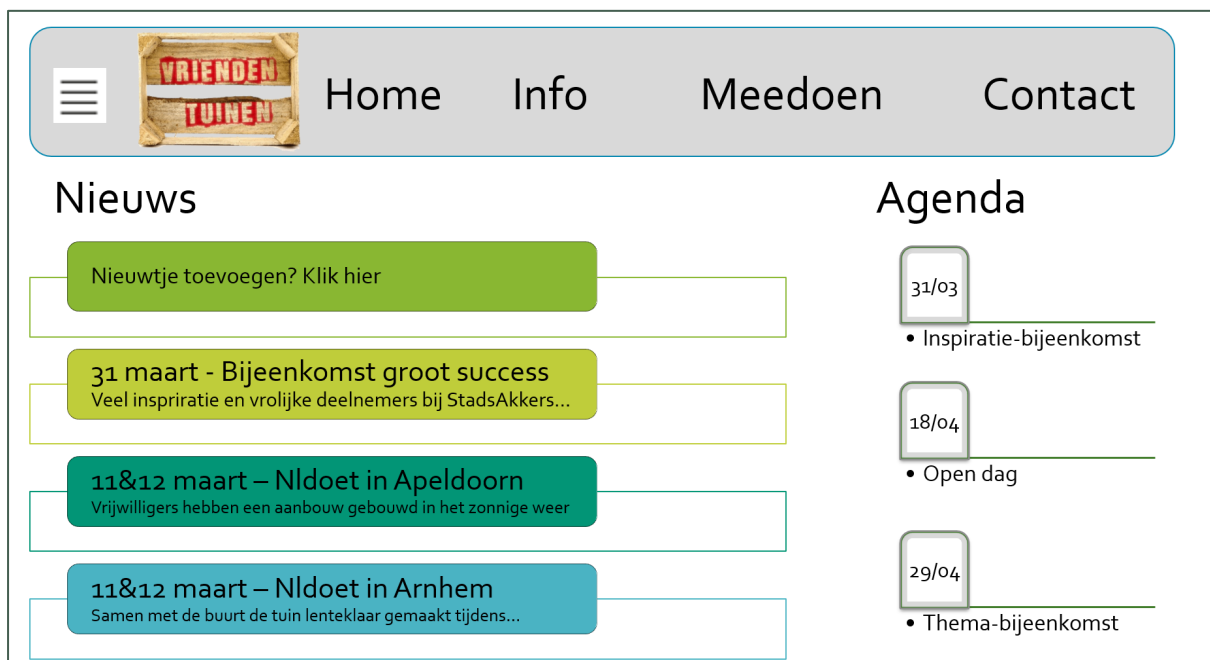


Figure 1: A homepage of the platform, with news about what has happened within different organisations and an agenda about what events are planned.



Figure 2: A themed information page about seeds, with a practical element, inspirational examples, and a forum for questions.



Figure 3: A page where new people can join (as volunteer, food garden, Vriendentuin, etc) and a step-plan will show what the next steps are to direct to the right page.

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