

## Todmorden – a Case Study in Sustainability

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### Abstract

This paper examines a community sustainability project located in the town of Todmorden, in the north west of England. Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET) is a coming together of diverse communities of interest within the town with local food production as their focus. IET is an example of a community taking direct action and implementing change, not only in their immediate environment but also, through a campaign which shares this knowledge and experience elsewhere within the United Kingdom and beyond.

Community sustainability is a term that is now so ubiquitous that it is in danger of losing all meaning. All development undertaken within the United Kingdom now comes with this label attached, and it usually describes the environmental credentials of the particular building(s) in question. The best of these schemes make energy saving and the reduction of green house gasses a priority, yet none address the damaging environmental impact of the globalised food industry. Pretty (2002) and Steel (2009) powerfully argue that unless action is taken at a local level to address both the environmental consequences of a global market in food production and the corresponding loss of local cultures that comes with it then a truly sustainable community cannot be said to exist. If we are to address climate change and the homogenisation of much of the world seriously then the developed countries relationship with food has to fundamentally alter.

The importance of IET is that it offers a model of what form such a response to this situation might be. It provides evidence that it is possible through processes of participation and engagement for local initiatives, developed around shared ideas, to begin to transform how people think and act.

**Keywords:** *Sustainability, community, participation, food production, learning and collective action*

## 1 Introduction

In her recent book *Hungry City*, Carolyn Steel (2009) explores the symbiotic relationship between the production and consumption of food and the development of urban culture from prehistory to the present day. She argues that today when the presence and availability of food, at least in the industrialised world, has become something which is taken for granted (Steel, 2009), we have lost contact with the processes that sustain our increasingly urban existence. The ready availability and abundance of cheap food on the supermarket shelf, coupled with the relative invisibility of its production and distribution, has enabled the typical consumer in the developed world both to ignore the damaging environmental consequences of our globalised food industry (Steel, 2009), and to lose contact, except for recreational purposes, with the natural world that ultimately sustains us and of which we are a part. (Pretty, 2002) The vast areas of the world, which are used to grow soya or beef, are simply invisible. They are out of sight and mind and this disconnection has enabled the multi-national corporations, which control much of the world's food supply (Tudge, 2003), to exploit the earth's resources in ways which are clearly neither sustainable nor ethical (Pretty, 2002).

Steel powerfully demonstrates that food "is one of the strongest forces in shaping the world" (Steel, 2009, p. 307), and poses the key question "How might it [food] be used to shape it [the world] better?" (Steel, 2009, p. 322). This global picture is of course replicated within the UK, where, for example currently "90% of all fruit and 40% of all vegetables consumed in the UK are grown overseas" (Dibb, S., Collins, J., Mayo, E., (n.d.), p. 5). Like other developed counties the UK is losing a sense of the local as farming is encouraged to become more and more efficient on the one hand (Trudge, 2003), and the food industry aims to provide consistency and limitless choice on the other. IET are challenging this status quo by demonstrating that such a creative shaping of the world as suggested by Steel is indeed possible and that it can be done in a way which not only takes account of environmental issues but in so doing can reconnect people with the places in where they live and work.

## 2 Local Context

Todmorden (see Figure 1) is situated in upper Calderdale in West Yorkshire, England. It is a former mill town with a population of approximately 10,500 people, surrounded by moorland, and is located at the confluences of three heavily wooded valleys, at the intersection of the wool and cotton trades, which were the foundation of the town's 18th and 19th century prosperity. The requirements of these industries, long since gone, have shaped the architectural heritage from this period, and a sufficient proportion of stone buildings such as weaver's cottages, mills, and the magnificent town hall remain to give the town a coherent urban character. This legacy of building, when coupled with the topography, climate and the remaining 19th century industrial infrastructure

create a discernable sense of place. The community is connected to Manchester and Halifax – the nearest cities – by both road and rail and the town sits on the Rochdale canal, also a clue to its industrial past. Todmorden is not a comfortable middle class enclave; it is a place that is still recovering from the loss of its principal industries that sustained it historically. It is an ethnically diverse community with the indigenous population living alongside minority groups from South Asia and more recent immigrants from Poland. It also contains significant levels of deprivation, a situation that brings with it corresponding problems concerning employment, health and social exclusion, which are typical of such areas. Todmorden ward, for example, is ranked as one of the 25 per cent of the most deprived in England, ranked 1,543 out of 8,414, and 15% of its housing stock is social housing which contains areas of substandard accommodation (Hay, 2008, p. 75).

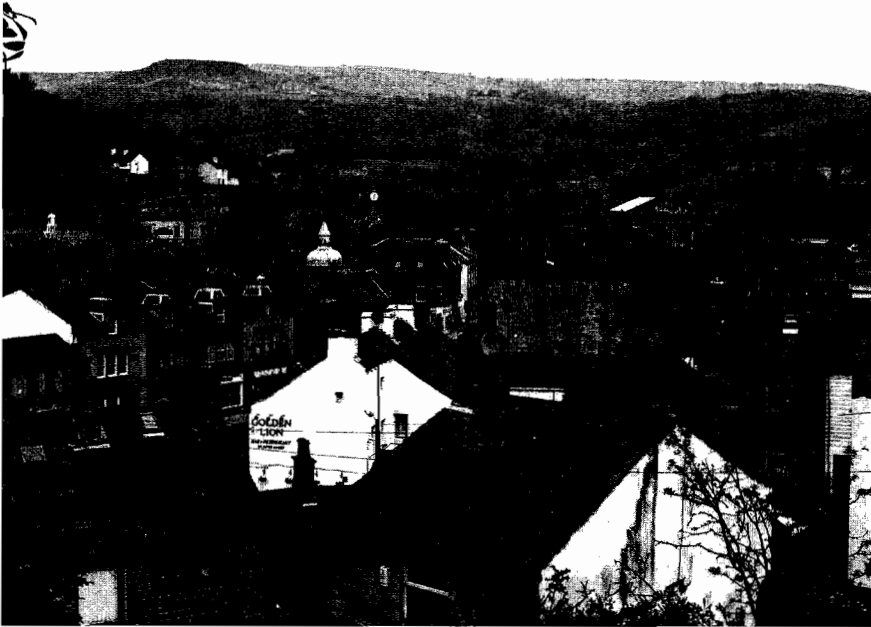


Figure 1: Todmorden (T. Green).

The disconnection between food production and consumption that exists in the town is common throughout the UK, and can be illustrated by reference to the last national census that was carried out in 2001. At that time, 4,500 of Todmorden residents between the ages of 16-75 were economically active; however, of those, only 44 were directly involved in agriculture while some 750 were engaged in retail, transport, storage and communication (Office of National Statistics, 2001). This statistical imbalance between the production of food and

its subsequent commoditisation by the market illustrates the scale of the task that IET faces.

Todmorden can therefore be understood as being a place with a strong sense of identity deriving from location and history. It is also however a diverse community with significant areas of deprivation, and accompanying need for socio and economic regeneration.

### **3 Community Sustainability**

Within the UK context, community sustainability has become the touchstone of urban regeneration. Current projects as diverse as New Islington in Manchester with its “iconic” new buildings, or at Barnet in North London, with its more low key proposals, claim this as their ultimate goal. But what is community sustainability? How are communities made stable, particularly in an economic environment where globalisation has destroyed traditional industries and the jobs that went with them. It is the case that with their principal industries gone many cities and towns throughout the United Kingdom have in recent years struggled to address social, economic and physical decline.

It was against this background that the then labour administration commissioned the Egan Review of Sustainable Skills, published in 1994, which has had considerable influence since then on national policy in this area. Egan both defines what makes a sustainable community and provides a prescription whereby they may be achieved. Egan defines a sustainable community as being one that will “meet the diverse need of existing and future residents, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion, and strengthen economic prosperity.” (Egan, 2004, p. 8). Following this definition the report then identifies the key role of Local Authorities in providing “visionary leadership in developing a Community Sustainability Strategy” which should “articulate clearly how sustainable development can be used to promote economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental quality” (Egan, 2004, p. 9). The report also recommends that successful strategies will be those “which give a greater degree of confidence to developers and investors and which help the community see the positive effects and wealth creation benefits of major developments” (Egan, 2004, p. 9).

It is instructive to note that whilst conforming to Egan’s definition of a sustainable community, IET’s approach to the achievement of this goal is markedly different from conventional regeneration practice as it has emerged in the UK in the post Egan period.

Following Egan, the various government funded Regional Development Agencies, or RDAs, which are charged with promoting regeneration through out the country, have adopted the idea of sustainable communities, and many of Egan’s recommendations in their drive to encourage inward investment in their

areas. Projects supported by the RDAs and influenced by Egan, range in scale from regional initiatives like the Thames Gateway, to neighbourhood renewal schemes such as the Pathfinder housing schemes found in rundown northern city centres.

These proposals all have something in common: a rejection of modernist ideas on zoning (as set out in the Charter of Athens); and the adoption of more “traditional” models of urban form, coupled with some form of consultation with local people regarding the particular form of development on offer. They also conform to Egan’s view that the public sector should lead in order to entice the private sector to invest, and that local people are there to be persuaded of the particular merits of any proposals on offer.

This model of regeneration does, however, come with some risks. It is, no matter how well intentioned, ‘top down’ in character and ultimate decision making does not lie with the local community for whose benefit the project is presumably intended. Regeneration following this model is something that is done *to* communities, or *for* communities; it consults but ultimately retains power and control. It thus runs the risk of excluding and alienating the very people it is intended to serve. In contrast to this top down approach, in the case of IET it is the community itself that is providing the leadership and vision, and responsibility and decision-making lies firmly in the hands of local people.

Conventional regeneration practice carries the risk of excluding the hard to reach. It is also true that the resultant special strategies which emerge from this process carry a further risk in that in the desire to replace the debilitating effects of modernist planning – with its particular aesthetic and spatial norms – with what is often referred to as “new urbanism”, one flawed vision of urban development is simply replaced with another. “New Urbanism”, as David Harvey has pointed out, has an “equally determinist spatiality” (Harvey, 1997, p.69), which in place of modernist practice draws instead on “images of community” (Harvey, 1997, p.69), but which can often result in a generic, bland café culture, which, as Richard Sennet has argued, “may provide a cleaner street, pretty houses and large shops, but give the inhabitants no way to mark their presence on the space” (Sennet, 2009, p. 237).

#### **4 IET and Sustainability**

In their rejection of the prescription of how to create sustainability offered by Egan, and because process and engagement is IET’s starting point they are closer to the position which Harvey takes when he argues that for urbanism to succeed in ways that include rather than exclude then it “needs to be understood as a group of fluid processes in dialectical relation to the spatial forms to which they give rise and it which in turn contain them” (Harvey, 1997, p.69). IET understands urbanism and landscape as Harvey says social movements should – as processes that determine the production of space. Rather than seeing space as something that, if you get it right, will shape the society in which you wish to

live, IET proposes that if you get the social dynamics right, then the community will shape the space that is best for them (see Figure 2).

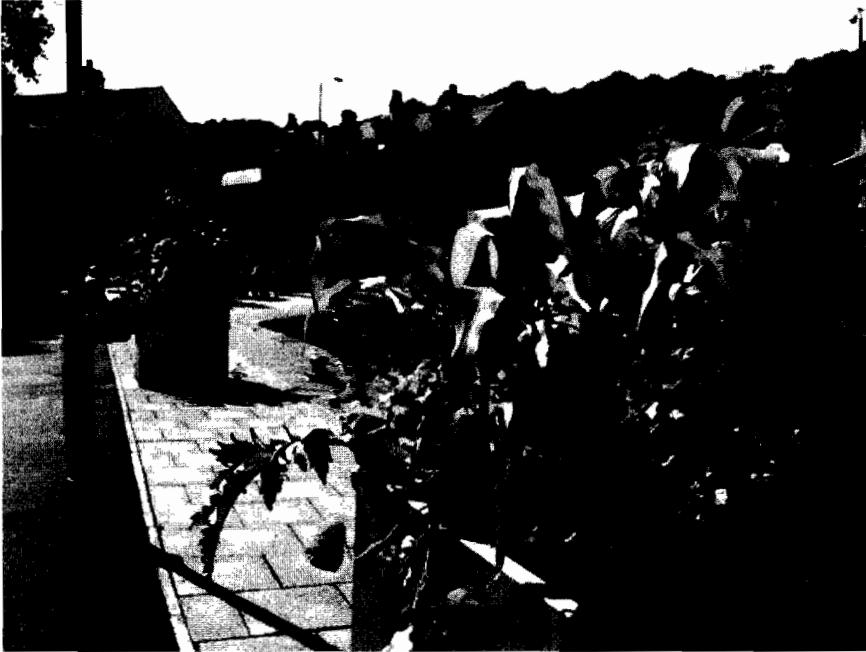


Figure 2: Maize at Fielden Wharf (<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk>).

IET's position is also supported by Pretty when he suggests that the "critical elements of knowledge for sustainability as follows: Its local legitimacy, its creation and recreation; its adaptive quality; and its embedded nature in social processes." (Pretty, 2002, p. 147). IET exhibits just these characteristics as it is rooted in community itself, and grew from local people coming together in the belief that they knew what was needed and that they did not require others, particularly external bodies or experts to validate their ideas and actions. In contrast to the consultation offered by the Egan model, which as Sherry Arnstein has noted is "not really about enabling people to participate in planning, but to enable power holders to 'educate' or 'cure' the participants" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). IET are setting the agenda and taking initiative. They are operating at the upper levels of citizen power, as defined by Arnstein, where "citizens can enter into partnerships that enable them to negotiate and engage in trade offs with traditional power holders" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

IET have not waited for decision makers to act, no experts have been commissioned to produce a master plan for this particular community and no icons are on the drawing board. In fact exactly the opposite has occurred, and an

alternative set of practices are emerging which challenge the methodologies and underlying assumptions of conventional regeneration practice. IET has taken the initiative by establishing a programme based on “self-reliance in response to social, economic and environmental change” (Incredible Edible Todmorden, 2010), and it is precisely this local ownership as defined by Arnstein and Pretty that is driving the project allowing it to bypass current dissatisfaction with mainstream political processes and perceived lack of progress on climate change. At the heart of the project is the recognition that local people are experts on their own lives and the resulting validation of local expertise, which flows from this insight, offers the possibility of genuine long-term community sustainability.

IET campaigns to “make Todmorden self sufficient in food by 2018” (Incredible Edible Todmorden, 2010), and from the start was a community initiative, based on principles of inclusion and participation. IET participant Nick Green perfectly summarises their inclusive approach as: “if you eat you are in” (N. Green, personal communication, November 14, 2009).

A crucial early decision not to apply for external funding was paradoxically important to their early success. Government funds to support initiatives like IET can be applied for, but they come, at least in the UK context, with qualitative targets and outcomes contracted in advance. IET believed that they needed the flexibility and freedom to take risks and to be as innovative as circumstances allowed free from bureaucratic monitoring and control.

IET was formed less than two years ago and the first meeting attracted 60 people. Since that beginning IET has now an active network of participants and supporters and has expanded its activities considerably. Speaking at a recent conference held in the local High School on the 14th November 2009, attended by over 250 people, Pam Warhurst one of the co-founders, outlined Incredible Edible’s aims as follows: “We thought of our community as having three areas of activity, which were Business, Learning and Community” (P. Warhurst, personal communication, November 14, 2009). She described each of these areas as being like spinning plates, each needing attention, each equally important, and each mutually dependent (P. Warhurst, personal communication, November 14 2009). This is a powerful and simple metaphor and illustrates that IET intentions go beyond growing food: they are concerned with understanding how the various sectors of the local community work, how they are interrelated, and how people can get involved wherever their position on a particular plate or plates. It is clear that IET are not just concerned with short term benefits but have a long term commitment which Warhurst describes as being from “cradle to cradle” (P. Warhurst, personal communication, November 2009). IET is seeking to build social cohesion and inclusion by involving all sectors of the community, there are no barriers to becoming involved, and all individuals and groups are seen as possible allies, converts and participants.

## 5 Achievements to date

In the eighteen months of their existence IET have achieved a great deal and they also acknowledge that there is a great deal still to do. A recent case study which examined the project, published by CABI, The Commission of Architecture and the Built environment summarises their activities as follows :

- To tackle climate change directly by growing “food not flowers”.
- To encourage investment in a local food economy.
- To develop a learning community around food.
- To partner with local authorities, schools, health trusts, housing associations etc.
- To campaign regionally and nationally. (CABI, 2009)

IET began their campaign by being seen doing things. They started to plant and, in the tradition of ‘guerrilla gardening,’ they did it in ways that were highly visible, and in a manner which increasingly drew local people, businesses, schools and the Local Authority into the enterprise. The starting point was identifying unused land within the town and simply appropriating it to grow food. Unused corners of the town centre became herb gardens, a section of the forecourt at the local railway station became an allotment, and a fallow section of a local graveyard became the home of a runner beans plot. A sale of fruit trees by a local supermarket enabled IET to turn its car park into an orchard, These public performances, which were as much political as horticultural, quickly got IET noticed and through word of mouth the initiative spread. The group carefully tended each plot and offered the results of their labours to all free of charge. Commuters emerging from the train station were encouraged to pick vegetables for their evening meal (see Figure 3). These early initiatives got the campaign noticed, brought unused or neglected land into production and people began to engage with their environment in active and collaborative ways.



Figure 3: Vegetable beds at Todmorden Station (<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/>).



Following the success of their initial campaign, and the realisation that there were areas of unused or fallow ground owned by the Local Authority which could be used more productively, IET have successfully lobbied for the appropriation of such ground for food production to be placed on a legal footing. The Authority have now agreed to offer innovative short-term leases at nominal rents on land which it owns, and local people will be able to apply for a licence in order to bring these, derelict, unsightly or vandalised spaces back into productive use. The council is thus able to support local food production and also to save money on maintenance and crime prevention.

Of particular importance to IET's thinking is the building of a local food economy. This is a long-term aim and is at an early stage. They are addressing this through both short and long term initiatives. The establishment of allotments provides vegetables on a seasonal basis and 50 beds, each 1.5 x 4.5m now exist on adopted land. An additional 30 beds have been created at Fernley Lee School and the total number of beds currently stands at 125. Over 20 orchards, large and small, have now been planted to provide fruit on a long-term basis and over 530 fruit trees have been planted since February 2009, along with 300 fruit bushes. In addition the development of the first community owned business, a fish farm is underway, which will provide long-term economic benefits (N. Green, personal communication, May 14, 2010). Local producers are being encouraged to produce eggs, cheese or organic meat, and consumers and producers are being put in touch through IET's website. For example the egg map plots the location and availability of eggs, and the orchard map the location of fruit (see Figure 4). Local products are now once again available in the town market.

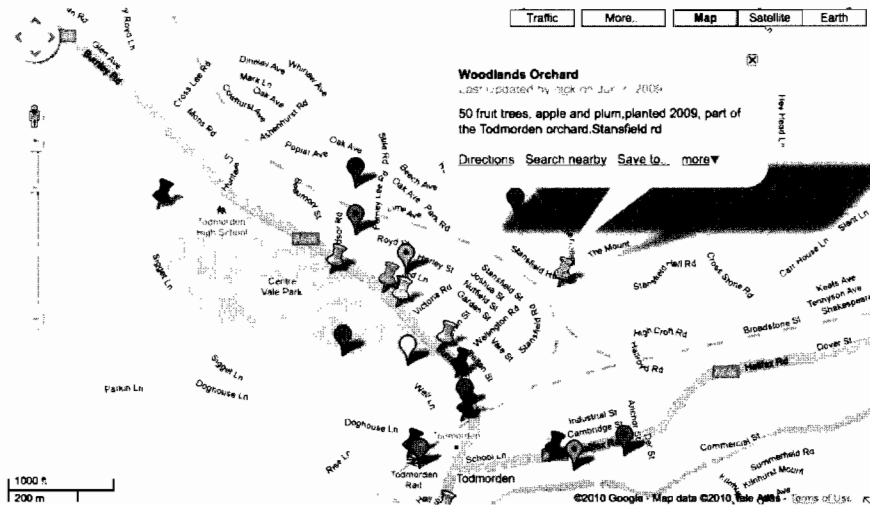


Figure 4: Online map of IET activity (<http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/resources>).

Relationships have been established with the Local Authority, resulting in the land lease initiative, and with Network Rail, the Health Authority and the Fire Service. All these agencies are supporting IET through releasing land that they own and, for example, the Local Health Centre has established a therapeutic herb garden in its grounds. All local schools are active and Pennine Homes, a regional provider of social housing, is encouraging its tenants, through small grants to buy seeds and by the provision of a tool sharing shop, to become involved. They have also identified empty land to develop both orchards and allotments.

All local schools, eight primary and one high school, are engaged in the project. They have all established allotments or raised beds on site and the local secondary school Todmorden High School is using the produce, which the students grow, in its own kitchen. It has recently been granted “specialist food status” (Todmorden High School, 2010), and is one of 180 national schools focusing on food quality and food education. The fish farm, mentioned above, will be established in the grounds of the school as a Community Interest Company and will bring together a board of trustees from school staff and pupils, business and community to run this community food hub focusing on new qualifications, skills and technologies and enterprise culture to facilitate and support the development of future initiatives both locally and regionally (Incredible Edible Todmorden, 2010).

IET is campaigning locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. They have found a ready audience for their ideas and are using information technology to get their message out. The website, [www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk](http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk), covers all aspects of their work and also gives advice on food production as well as signalling coming events and initiatives. IET have been very successful in publishing their work, and have received extensive regional media coverage, as well as comment in the national and international press and on television. They have recently held their first conference, in November 2009, in order to disseminate their message and share it with others. This work has resulted in the establishment of three other community projects based on IET principles, namely Incredible Edible Huddersfield, Macclesfield and Rosedale.

Incredible Edible Todmorden has been active for barely two years and has already built up a considerable portfolio of integrated projects. Many of the characteristics of sustainability as defined by Egan or Pretty are being successfully demonstrated on the ground. The initiative illustrates, I believe, that it is possible for local people, if they so wish, to tackle issues that can seem intractable on the one hand and remote from everyday experience on the other. IET is demonstrating, at least at this early stage of its existence that change is not only possible but also that it is achievable. Sustainability, and particularly Community Sustainability, is of course an ongoing and continuous process and one cannot say decisively that IET has achieved all that is required, but certainly a solid foundation has been successfully laid.

## 6 Conclusion

It may be argued that what the people involved with Incredible Edible Todmorden have achieved is small and that it is irrelevant in the modern world, yet as Jules Pretty has pointed out, for most of human history “the daily lives of humans have been played out close to nature” (Pretty, 2002), and in our increasing urbanised world this is a connection that is increasingly remote. Through a process of community-wide learning, ownership and collective action IET is building knowledge and capacity to sustain their town and its people into the future. Pretty (2002) and Steel (2009) argue that community sustainability cannot be fully achieved if the critical environmental concerns arising from the way the developed world currently feeds itself are not addressed by a fundamental change of direction. IET tackles the root of this disconnection between our food and our urban lifestyles and offers a practical demonstration of what can be achieved. The work that IET is doing challenges the status quo, and by offering an alternative, workable and replicable model which places food, and its associated practices, once again at the centre of community life, it contains important lessons for us all.

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