

FOOD INCUBATORS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONS

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Abstract

Food and drink represents the largest manufacturing sector in the EU and encouragingly has sustained positive growth. Even during the economic downturn, levels of employment in the food and drink industry remained quite stable. While the sector has excellent potential for artisan and specialty producers to establish, the lack of access to food grade workspace is a serious and inhibiting barrier to entry. Moreover, artisan food producers struggle to support the capital requirements of setting up a production facility. On the other hand, there is an abundance of underutilized properties in public and private ownership which could be re-imagined as vibrant Food Incubators but the promoters of same lack the skills and practical strategies to develop them. From this point of view, food incubators have the unique potential to spur productive, inclusive and sustainable economic development. They provide a strong foundation for the creation and expansion of food businesses and jobs by helping communities, Vocational Education and Training (VET) bodies, development agencies to revitalise underutilised buildings into powerhouses of food sector learning, innovation and production. The paper presents the project FITR – Food Incubators Transforming Regions, which seeks to forge an effective and replicable model to provide the learning and strategic structure to develop food kitchens and incubators as enterprise, training and support drivers at regional level.

Key words: food incubator, sustainable development, curriculum, innovative learning

INTRODUCTION

Food and drink represents the largest manufacturing sector in the EU and encouragingly has sustained positive growth (EC, 2015). Even during the economic downturn, levels of employment in the food and beverage service activities remained quite stable. It is a fragmented industry with 1,519 thousands enterprises employing 7 806 thousands people (Eurostat, 2013). Based on the statistical data (Eurostat, 2013) more than half (55.3 %) of all the enterprises within the EU-27's food and beverage services sector were classified as belonging to the restaurants and mobile food services subsector [2]. Moreover, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) account for 99 % of companies operating in this industry and, often, are part of highly fragmented and complex food chains (Smith & Barling, 2014) [4].

From this point of view, food incubators have the unique potential to spur productive, inclusive & sustainable economic development. They provide a strong foundation for the creation and expansion of food businesses and jobs by helping communities, VET bodies, development agencies to revitalise underutilised buildings into powerhouses of food sector learning, innovation and production. At a time of rising social inequality, food incubators also offer the prospect of expanding employment in the growing food sector through educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations. The project Food Incubators Transforming Regions (FITR, 2015), founded by European Commission through the programme Erasmus+, aims to forge an effective and replicable model to provide the learning and structure to develop food kitchens and incubators as enterprise (FITR, 2015) [2]. This in return will spur productive and

sustainable economic development through an increase in available resources to start small businesses and creation of jobs in this sector.

The project undertakes a process of revitalisation at a local community level through the development of food incubators in dilapidated buildings. These buildings are an economic drain in communities and through FITR they can be turned into a hub for economic prosperity, by establishing food incubators in communities who provide training and workspace for these emerging food entrepreneurs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Food Incubators Transforming Regions (FITR) project brings together partners from Northern Ireland (Banbridge District Council and Canice Consulting), Slovakia (Slovak University of Agriculture and New Edu, n.o.), Netherlands (Stitching Business Development Agency) and Irish partners Momentum Marketing and Roscommon LEADER Partnership.

A key aspect of FITR project is its ability to harness the knowledge triangle to capture and share a unique VET formula for the development of food incubators. By creating Regional Partnerships involving VET institutions (e.g. HEIs, business training organizations), local governments, food industry and economic development stakeholders, the project enables the sharing of knowledge and best practice between organizations from the fields of research and education and this will be converted into wider innovations in policy and practice at regional level. The result aims to create ongoing relationships between diverse institutions working in the food-entrepreneurship knowledge triangle. Through this collaborative aspect and shared ownership of the project, the establishment of Regional Alliances strengthens the technical assets of the regional food sector to facilitate regional growth and better knowledge triangle impact.

The FITR project directly enables the provision of new training content motivated by industry need. While there are many VET responses for food entrepreneurs and SMEs,

there is no course for vocational education and training in the theme of best practice in developing regional infrastructure and support structures that may stimulate food economies. FITR plans to address this lag by providing a unique training curriculum and course materials to successfully establish and manage food incubator hubs to cater for the growing numbers of emerging food entrepreneurs who are in urgent need of a place to produce, learn and grow. It targets community drivers, development agencies and VET bodies. Developed by a compelling mix of academics & industry specialists, it epitomizes quality VET provision.

At policy level, the partners plan to develop a training blueprint to develop or enhance physical food incubation hubs in local communities in a training tool format. The objective is to better sensitize local, regional and national authorities of the potential of food industries as community based stimuli at regional and local development. The FITR Partnership after finishing its activities will engage with industry and policy decision makers to adopt and implement food sector investment which should stimulate confidence in communities, provide enterprise access and social cohesion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The FITR project started in September 2015 and over 24 months, FITR plans to achieve in four regions - in Ireland, UK, Slovakia and Netherlands, four key deliverables (FITR, 2015) [3]:

-Through a Triple Helix leadership network to establish four sustainable, sector focused **Regional Partnerships** to study and capture best practice in the development of Food incubators and.

-Create and publish a “**The Essential Guide to developing a Regional Food Incubator**” to focus on "how-to" strategies for food hub establishments and operations that are based on successful models operating in other regions and new concepts from the US (the market leaders in food incubators).

-Create and publish a **course curriculum**, guiding Vocational Education and Training

practitioners on the topics and skills most needed to establish and manage a Food incubator.

-Develop an intensive **blended learning “The Essential Toolkit to develop a successful Food Incubator” course** based on open education resources, targeting regional change makers in local government, development agencies, communities, businesses, not-for profits and others interested in establishing food hubs.

The FITR project engages with four clear target groups:

-**Communities** with physical space that can be easily converted to a food hub - often overlooked, we embeds this project in local communities. According to the European Cluster Observatory local culture and heritage provide opportunities for exploiting creative potential, by providing opportunities for scope and space for creative entrepreneurship to take place, e.g. integrated training and co-working spaces in community buildings.

-Existing and emerging **food entrepreneurs**.

-**Vocational Educational Training trainers and Higher Educational Institutions** tutors involved in creative industries disciplines and entrepreneurship for social inclusion.

-**Local authorities and public sector agencies** in influencing policy - Affordable space for creative activity and enterprise is an enduring issue that needs policy maker influence. Artists and other creative people are routinely priced out of areas that become popular due to the very creative activity that they helped generate. Given the precedence of underutilised and eyesore properties as a legacy of recession, public bodies can incentivise reuse.

Rather than solely focusing on the final target group, partnership harnesses the knowledge triangle of actors working in food, regional marketing, and wider economic development. This enables to ensure the relevance and provide greater strategic focus to the training course, but also to create a more enabling environment for food incubators to be adopted as a driver of food entrepreneurship in the EU. This will be achieved through the creation of 4 Regional Partnerships.

FITR Course Curriculum & Open

Educational Materials

Food incubators are proven to be a changemakers in increasing the labour market relevance of VET as they strive to give empowerment by offering an array of sector specific training access, technical assistance and resources for current and aspiring food entrepreneurs by promoting equal access to economic opportunity as entry costs to the sector are negated to manageable levels.

While across whole European Union many communities and local government bodies see merit in developing food incubators, they lack the skills to realise same (Palkova, Olejar, Cviklovic, & Lukac, 2016). The FITR toolkit and online training course cover different formats of food incubators:

-regional value-added food processing centres,

-shared-use community kitchens,

-shared-use agricultural processing facilities, which are designed for use by farmers for collective grading, processing and packaging of farm produce or other commodities,

-mobile incubators that can go to primary producers.

FITR Course Curriculum & Open educational materials is available in 3 languages (English, Dutch and Slovak) and based on the following principles:

-comprehensive and relevant course curriculum and content;

-comprehensive and relevant set of open educational resources, which together comprise the course content, but which can also be used independently.

Course curriculum comprises 6 modules and covers following topics:

-**Creating possibilities for food incubation in the Region** - a series of modules to train participants how to review of the potential of the sector through learning how to conduct a robust and credible feasibility analysis, the research tools to establish need and methodologies to harness support, identify suitable premises, how to technically assess and SWOT each building and negotiation skills to acquire the building at preferential rates.

-**Different Models of food incubators** - training to allow participants to synthesize

best practices models and assess best fit for themselves; regional value-added food processing centres; shared-use community kitchens; shared-use agricultural processing facilities, which are designed for use by farmers for collective grading, processing and packaging of farm produce or other commodities; mobile incubators that can go to primary producers premises and act as in situ production units.

-Food incubators business strategy - the nuts and bolts of running a food incubator, licensing options for operators, kitchen management protocols, adding value to your incubator e.g. shared sales & distribution platforms.

-Stimulating demand - tools to develop a pipeline of new food entrepreneurs in your region through Pre-Incubation supports and mechanisms, creative marketing of the resource.

-Accessing resources - training in innovative access to public finance, crowd funding potential and attracting corporate sponsors.

Connecting to collaborations & communities - the potential of co-working, new methodologies for creative collaborations, parameters of same and success tools.

The course are taught in a blended learning format and duration of each module represents 25- 30 hours of self-guided online and classroom based learning with:

-Classroom training course designed for use by HEI - VET and Business Support providers. Learning will embedded through self-assessment exercises (leading to a course certificate), peer to peer communications and setting up an ideas portal for participants who may like to collaborate with other emerging food incubator developers.

-Mobile and online learning resources for individual private study.

-Training notes for HEI-VET and Community Business Support providers to integrate our course and open educational resources into their offerings.

CONCLUSIONS

The Food Incubators Transforming Regions (FITR) project is Erasmus + project supported

by European Commission which has been started in September 2015[1].

The FITR project seeks to forge an effective and replicable model to provide the learning and strategic structure to develop food kitchens & incubators as enterprise, training and support drivers at regional level. The partnership involves 7 partners across 4 counties - UK, Ireland, Netherlands and Slovakia and will run for 24 months. It is based on the facts that even if there are many VET responses for food entrepreneurs and SMEs, there is no vocational education and training in the theme of training tools for developing regional infrastructure and support structures that will stimulate food economies. The FITR project comprises unique training curriculum and course materials to successfully establish and manage food incubator hubs to cater for the growing numbers of emerging food entrepreneurs who are in urgent need of a place to produce, learn and grow. The FITR project targets community drivers, development agencies and VET bodies. Developed by a compelling mix of academics & industry specialists, it epitomizes quality VET provision.

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