

**'Peas & Love': A Case Study in Kindness and the Power of Small Actions.
Incredible Edible, Todmorden, West Yorkshire, England, UK**

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Abstract

Incredible Edible Todmorden is a community enterprise which arose out of grass-roots community activity and promotes a radical approach to community building, embracing the core values of kindness, inclusion and mutuality. This paper explores the evolution of this innovative initiative, highlighting the way in which it has been driven and shaped by its commitment to these core values as it transforms public spaces and the lives of those it touches along the way. Using food as the focus of their activities, Incredible Edible Todmorden is an exemplar of translating sustainability goals into action, and the paper explores how this approach has impacted on the community and individuals who have engaged in their activities. Drawing from interviews with activists, other local sources and evaluations of Incredible Edible, the paper clarifies how their radical approach to community work exemplifies elements of Freirian philosophy of informal education and human development, centring love and kindness as the foundation for all dialogue.

Key Words

Community building, food activism, values, love and kindness

Introducing Incredible Edible Todmorden

Celebrating their tenth anniversary in 2018, Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET) evolved out of radical, grass-roots community activity, which they characterise as food activism promoting community resilience. Underpinning IET's approach to 'radical community building in action' is a commitment to kindness, inclusion and mutuality, as they focus on growing food to share, running festivals and cooking demos, and supporting businesses and other local groups; all with no paid staff, no buildings, and no public funding.

A way of working that has been transplanted into over 700 communities worldwide, Incredible Edible started as a seed of an idea that germinated during a discussion between friends and activists sitting round a kitchen table, discussing social and environmental problems facing the local and global community. The Chair explains how the consensus around the table that night was that:

'there was no point waiting for governments to do something about it: we would have to stop being victims and just do it: we could make a kinder, safer and more sustainable environment for ourselves and our grandchildren'.

Committed to working in an inclusive and non-hierarchical manner, this small group of passionate people called a public meeting to explore the extent to which other local residents shared their perspective. Fifty-nine people attended that first meeting, and since then over 1,000 people have participated in IET activities, while the group's membership has grown exponentially; possibly reflecting the fact that their membership criteria state simply that 'if you eat, you're in' (IET, nd)!

IET operates under a simple stated aim, which is to 'work together for a world where all share responsibility for the future wellbeing of our planet and ourselves' (IET, nd). The group aims to provide access to good local food for all, through:

- working together
- learning – from cradle to grave
- supporting local business

Incredible Edible Todmorden is registered¹ as a Community Benefit Society, reflecting the fact that everything they do is undertaken by unpaid volunteers 'doing our best for our town', and relying entirely on donations for funding. The stated object of IET (2016) is to 'carry on any business for the benefit of the community' by (among other things):

- (a) Building a strong local community by developing and offering volunteer opportunities and skills development

¹ Under the Co-operative & Community Benefit Societies Act 2014.

- (b) Developing and capitalising upon opportunities to reclaim unused land and grow food to share.
- (c) Protecting and enhancing local biodiversity.
- (d) Offering workshops and materials to local residents to develop skills in growing food.
- (e) Offering workshops and demonstrations to local residents to develop skills in cooking tasty, nutritional food on a budget.
- (f) Encouraging reuse, upcycling and repurposing of goods and thereby reduce landfill.
- (g) Organising and supporting events to unite and/or strengthen and/or support the local community.

About Todmorden

Todmorden is a market town and former mill-town situated at the confluence of three valleys in the heart of the South Pennine Hills, on the historic border of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Although subsumed into the local authority district of Calderdale in West Yorkshire (dominated by the administrative centre in Halifax), Todmorden retains a strong sense of identity, and people characterise themselves as being fiercely independent. The town and its extensive rural hinterland has a population of around 15,500, the age profile of which is similar to England: 18% are under 16 years of age, 9% are aged 16-24, 54% are aged 25-64, 16% are aged 65-84 and 3% are aged 85 and over. There is only limited ethnic diversity in the community, with over 92% of the population identifying as white. Nevertheless, there is a small but significant population of people of South Asian heritage, many of whom live in a tight community in the heart of the town.

Although home ownership in the town is slightly higher than national and district averages, and educational attainment rates at level 4 and above are slightly higher than the national average, a significant proportion of the population experience poverty. Official figures² show that 17.5% of the population is income deprived, 22.9% of children aged 0 - 15 live in families that are income deprived, and 18.7% of people aged 60 or over are income deprived (compared with 14.6%, 19.9% and 16.2% respectively for England). Health and care indicators³ for Todmorden's resident population suggest that rates of bad / very bad general health and limiting long term illness or disability are significantly higher than the English rates.

Much of this deprivation – which places up to 3/8^{ths} of Todmorden's housing among the 10% most deprived areas in the country – is experienced by people living in private rented accommodation in the town centre and in peripheral social housing estates. The proximity of high levels of deprivation alongside affluent areas is not uncommon for rural areas; nevertheless, it can exaggerate the experience of deprivation for those people living in the poorer parts of town.

² Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2015, London: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

³ 2011 Census, London: Office for National Statistics.

The characteristics of the population summarised here have informed IET's key priorities. The emphasis on kindness, inclusion and mutual support has arisen from their recognition that – like the UK as a whole and in relation to global comparisons – social, health and economic inequalities persist in the town. When meeting with volunteers, it is evident that they come from all parts of the community, for example reflecting the disparate ethnic backgrounds of residents as well as including people of all ages, abilities and socio-economic status. This inclusivity has been achieved through deliberate, persistent and genuine attempts to reach out to all parts of the community, making people from all backgrounds feel welcome and treating all members and volunteers with equal respect and dignity. This has even extended to providing food for one particular local 'character': a neo-Nazi online activist who promulgates hatred between different parts of society, and refuses to accept state benefits to which they are entitled. Kindness extends in this way to everyone in the community, in the hope that they will feel included and maybe learn to be kinder to one another.

Radical Community Building in Action

In the early days, members of the evolving IET (and other community activists) engaged in 'guerrilla planting', taking the initiative to smarten up derelict pieces of land, as they felt these had been neglected for long enough by the authorities and landowners. These IET actions differed from the guerrilla tactics of other environmental campaigners in that they ensured that their planting – as well as enhancing the appearance of the target sites – would generate edible produce that they could make available to members of the community. Hence, cherry trees, fruit bushes, rhubarb crowns, herbs and other produce were planted in a number of sites across the town, and the local newspaper ran articles promoting the IET agenda and letting local residents know that the food was there for them to harvest as and when it ripened.

As more people joined the group, it became clear that IET needed to become more organised in its approach, so as to maximise their impact on the town's environment and to ensure that everybody who wanted to had a role to play in the process. IET began formalising the structure of the group (which led ultimately to its registration as a Community Benefit Society) and allocated roles and tasks within the structure to suitably qualified and experienced individuals. For instance, people with experience in managing finances became involved in fundraising; people who had previously organised community events worked together with others with experience of delivering training to develop events that would appeal to and inform members of the wider community about issues relating to local food production, sustainability and healthy eating; and people keen to get their hands dirty were invited to attend regular planting and gardening maintenance days.

Heightened awareness around the town of IET's aims and *modus operandi* was achieved very quickly, as members were active from the start in promoting their ambitions, both to generate understanding and support and to secure more engagement in their activities. Every informal education opportunity was taken to engage people in discussions around IET's reason for being active, to raise awareness and encourage people to grow and buy locally-produced food. As

part of this work, IET members developed relationships with local food shops, supporting them in promoting the 'buy local' message: both as a means of reducing the environmental impact of transporting food long distances and to ensure that money spent on food in Todmorden was circulated through the local economy, to everyone's benefit.

IET has forged other partnerships, with local community organisations, landowners and businesses / agencies with properties in the town centre. These relationships have been nurtured through honest dialogue and respect, resulting in partners either coming forward to offer, or acquiescing to requests for permission to plant on their land, thereby creating more formal opportunities for planting. High profile planting and maintenance has taken place in this way in raised beds in front of the police station and the railway station, in and around several schools throughout the town, around the recently-opened health centre (where IET have planted an Apothecary's Garden), outside the local volunteer-run theatre and on a high-profile site 'land-banked' by a supermarket chain for a number of years. These sites are in evidence throughout the town, and are seen by the whole population of Todmorden – and visitors to the town – on an almost daily basis. Not only has this resulted in the townscape environment being improved, people are also regularly harvesting herbs, fruit and other seasonal produce as a matter of course.

Having been successful in securing funds through their own endeavours, IET has been able to pay for and implement other environmental improvements throughout the town. For instance, creative volunteers have painted murals at various sites, complementing the planting and brightening up the town through the fallow seasons. Information boards – promoting a deeper understanding of issues relating to diet and food production and transportation – have been erected at different points throughout the town. All of these bear the Incredible Edible name and logo, and encourage local people to become involved; 'if you eat, you're in' translated into action every day. IET has also secured wide support (from the Town Council, local traders and residents) for key public areas in the town to be nominated as Assets of Community Value, thereby ensuring their continued contribution to the health of the town and its environment.

This model of community-generated activism has sustained the engagement of large numbers of community members in voluntary activity over an extended period. The fortnightly planting and gardening sessions attract in excess of forty participants, and draw people from all parts of the community. Everyone who attends is allocated a role, and care is taken to ensure that these roles are commensurate with the abilities and interests of participants. In this way, IET has been particularly successful in facilitating the participation of local people who may be: learning disabled; experiencing mental health problems; recently-arrived or/and migrants; speakers of other languages; or exhibiting the characteristics of other traditionally excluded groups. As the Chair explains:

'We've seen the power of mundane actions: for instance, washing up is a long rigmarole, but people love it ... and people you might think would never speak together queue up to take dirty dishes, and work

and talk together. It's exactly the same with weeding and litter-picking'.

What makes the group's activities so successful is their commitment to sharing a free meal made entirely from local produce with all volunteers at the end of these sessions, embedding kindness and a sense of belonging and community in everything the group does. The Chair characterises this as follows:

'The primitive notion, the tribal thing of eating together, knowing you belong to that tribe... nothing is nicer than a huge table full of folk chatting and eating after a morning's graft. Looking down that table and listening to the conversations: between teachers and people with Downs syndrome; between alcoholics and solicitors ... that's why people come here ... not for gardening ... it's for food and community'.

Impact and Outcomes

As well as the evident impact on the townscape and environment in Todmorden. IET claims to have had a positive impact in all three of the broad areas on which it focuses: community, business and learning. A recently conducted evaluation (Morley et al, 2017) explored, among other things, why people have become and remain involved in IET's activities. Some of the main reasons cited correspond with the group's community-building aspirations, with participants emphasising the positive impact of their involvement in IET on their health and wellbeing, as well as their enhanced understanding of a range of issues. In particular, and corresponding with the characterisation above, IET members and volunteers highlighted the positive impact of their participation on their sense of belonging to a community and friendship.

While IET is clear about its broad aims, the Chair asserts that it steers clear of setting targets, or working towards outcomes framed by external stakeholders:

'Kindness isn't outcome-driven. It's not three years funding. It's embedded. It grows'.

This explains why they avoid applying for or accepting funding from public sector bodies, as this invariably comes with conditions that typically do not correspond with the group's ethos of kindness and collaboration.

The evaluation found that IET has had a broadly positive impact on and is supported by local business, although it identified concerns expressed by some local traders that the notion of providing free food runs counter to their economic interests. This demonstrates the complexity of balancing the aspirations of grassroots-led action with the competing demands of a wide range of stakeholders.

Similarly, the extent to which IET has had an impact on local people's learning or awareness about the issues that triggered its formation ten years ago is hard to quantify. Undoubtedly, the group can claim to have succeeded in providing learning opportunities for large numbers of people, hundreds having attended

growing and cooking classes, and participated in a range of events designed to raise awareness of the way in which food is produced, transported and marketed. A recent four-day *Festival of Ideas* drew on the contributions of experts and local people to accommodate a range of ideas about place-making and making resilient communities (resilient in relation to the environment, the people, and the infrastructure). Unsurprisingly, this event concluded with:

‘an incredible fabulous feast, bringing all sorts of people together to make connections, exploring the power of small actions ... seeing how far can we push collaboration and kindness, using kindness as our currency’.

While participation in these formal and informal learning opportunities can be assumed to have been impactful, it is difficult to measure their impact. Similarly, positive outcomes might be ascribed to the involvement of children in IET-led initiatives at schools throughout the town. As well as running growing projects in school grounds, IET has helped schools to develop the curriculum to build on pupils’ practical learning.

Discussion & Analysis

IET’s approach embraces a range of community development approaches. Their work values the local knowledge and culture of their members, and builds on the assets within the community, reflecting social justice, ecological and asset-based approaches (e.g. Ife & Tososiero, 2006). The IET model demonstrates that the pursuit of an ‘abundant community’ is possible, taking responsibility for local and global environmental issues and offering a way of working that acknowledges the centrality of community to individual and group health and wellbeing (McKnight & Block, 2015).

Explaining the centrality of kindness in their work, IET’s Chairperson acknowledges the extent to which this form of practice reflects Freire’s (1970) characterisation of education as an ‘act of love’, behaving towards all those with whom they come into contact in a ‘humanising’ manner. This reflects, too, wider conceptualisations of professionally loving practice in supporting the development of younger members of the cohort of volunteers (Purcell, 2018). The act of eating and talking together at the end of group activities to acknowledge individuals’ contribution and as a means of strengthening community facilitates interactions at a respectful, human level, exemplifying Freire’s (1993) call for love to feature as the ‘foundation for dialogue’. The title of this case study is formed from something one of the volunteers said during a recent talk: ‘we are all about peas and love ... the food is a means to developing a loving and resilient community’.

The group talks openly about power in all their deliberations. In the first instance, the decision to proceed was conceived as an act of the community seizing power from statutory agencies that were deemed too slow or lacking commitment to the changes sought by activists. Inasmuch as IET has managed to take responsibility for implementing their own decisions – often in spite of opposition from traditional power structures – their approach reflects (at a local

level at least) the view that power lies in the ability to produce intended effects (Hague & Harrop, 2013). The group has undoubtedly been impactful, and has demonstrated the effectiveness of not waiting until (more powerful) others grant permission for actions to bring about change; and has managed to challenge and change the policies and practices of local decision-makers along the way.

Furthermore, IET has developed considerably the individual and collective capabilities of its members, thereby creating new forms of community or commons (Negri & Hardt, 2009). IET's creative application of power has resulted in the reclaiming by local people of the public realm of Todmorden, and has built on a counter-cultural tradition to strengthen local people's 'just do it' attitude, thereby contributing to both place-making and place-keeping (Dobson, 2014).

Assessing the distribution of power within the group highlights the challenges of working in a co-operative manner, where the views of all members are given credence in the decision-making process. Undoubtedly, the success of IET in sustaining the involvement of large numbers of people is testament to this, and they are the embodiment of people power, in terms of internal decision-making as well as activity (such as 'guerrilla planting'). The recent evaluation of IET highlighted, however, the importance of the drive and dynamism of a small number of 'charismatic, inspirational and entrepreneurial champions', or change agents, highlighting concern about what might happen when they are less involved or leave the group. IET's ethos reflects the passionate commitment of the original activists, one of whom leads the group in their role as chairperson; should a differently inspired personality seek to lead the group, it is possible this way of working will be diluted.

Other factors illuminated by the group's work include the impact on their success of resistance to change, scepticism and divergence. While the group can legitimately claim to be inclusive, some members of the community remain to be convinced of their arguments and – whether through scepticism or an unwillingness to embrace IET's approach – have not engaged in their activities. Likewise, differences in opinion of committed members have tested the robustness of the group, and some of the original members have broken away to implement projects that reflect more closely their own interpretation of the group's original vision. To date, these schisms have not been destructive, reflecting the personalities and values of key personnel; but the destructive potential of such upheavals cannot be ignored.

As already alluded to, the success of IET's commitment to kindness, inclusion and mutuality has garnered interest from across the globe. Their approach has been replicated in over 700 communities across the globe, and IET regularly plays host to international visitors keen to learn from their approach to radical community building. Without being prescriptive about how others should work, IET has given their support to these other initiatives, allowing them to use their branding and developing a support network. This demonstrates the power of small actions to change the conversation and bring about change, all based on one small word, which ends the Chair's description of the atmosphere at IET's most recent AGM:

'I can't tell you how much good was in the room, how much creativity and collaboration and kindness'.

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