



wetenschapswinkel



Van voedselbank naar voedseltuin

Een haalbaarheidsonderzoek

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Summary

Motivation

Stichting Moestuyn Projecten (the foundation for vegetable garden projects) has been using the Maarschalkerweerd vegetable gardens since 2003 – organically cultivated gardens in Utrecht with a shop and a restaurant. People who are incapacitated for work carry out all kinds of work there under the supervision of professionals. Thanks to the efforts, interest and support of so many people and the cooperation with the care organisation Abrona, the Maarschalkerweerd vegetable garden project has proven to be a great success.

The board of the foundation is considering setting up a new project – voedseltuin (food garden) – at another location in or near Utrecht. A food garden is a 'socially-conscious green enterprise'. People who come to work at the organic food garden as volunteers have very low incomes. They share in the harvest, the remainder of which is also sold through local channels or through socially-conscious restaurants. The aim of the board of the foundation is that 200 people will be able to spend two half-days a week producing their own food.

Testing feasibility

The board of Stichting Moestuyn Projecten is keen to further elaborate the idea of the food garden and to test the feasibility using the following questions:

1. Is it possible to roll out the vegetable garden concept and/or can it be modified in the direction of a food garden? What are the success factors and the threats?
2. What are the differences in investments and in operation between the vegetable garden concept and a food garden?
3. Are the right conditions present for a food garden in the province of Utrecht? What needs to happen to create such conditions?

The feasibility study carried out focused on three core themes: economic aspects, social aspects and conditions.

Economic aspects

As there is not yet a definite location available for the food garden, the set-up and layout of the current vegetable garden has acted as the model for the set-up of the food garden. The cultivation plan, sales opportunities and proceeds of the products from the food garden have been assumed to be identical to those of the current vegetable garden. On the basis of the necessary investments and costs, and taking account of the loss of income resulting from 200 volunteers sharing in the weekly harvests, it has been calculated that the food garden must be at least 6 hectares in size. The aim is for the food garden to be operating optimally and to be budget-neutral within five years. The operating losses in the years leading up to the garden's creation will amount just under €230,000. A further sum of €220,000 is also necessary in order to make investments in buildings and mechanisation. Moreover, fluctuating harvests (in terms of volume and quality) and yield prices from one year to the next form a risk for the level of the operating result. Yields from a food garden in the form of the contribution to the reduction of CO₂ emissions by means of local production (local for local), improvement of the nutritional level of the volunteers and the reinforcement of social cohesion have not been included in the economic evaluation.

Social feasibility

The food garden is intended for people with a very low income. This is a different target group of volunteers from the group currently working at the vegetable garden. According to the 2008 Armoedemonitor (poverty monitor), the potential target group for the food garden amounts to between 10,000 and 15,000 people, more than half of whom are of non-Western origin. The composition of the target group is varied, and respondents doubt whether sufficient numbers of people would be interested in volunteering to work in the food garden, for example because they might be ashamed of their position, lack the motivation to do voluntary work in a food garden or have no affinity with cultivating food (and/or do not want to try). The aim of attracting a group of 200 volunteers to work in the garden is ambitious and will cost a great deal of time and effort. Experience has also taught us to expect a high turnover of volunteers.

Conditions

The research highlights a number of points for which solutions are required to make the food garden a success both in social and economic terms:

- Ensuring sufficient volunteers.
- Finding a suitable location.
- Providing financial means for investment, initial costs and covering risks.
- Setting up the administrative organisation.

Both finding volunteers in a group of people who have to make ends meet on a very low income and obtaining a suitable piece of land can be facilitated by the cooperation of a public-sector body such as the municipal council. Without such cooperation, a number of things would simply not be possible. Such public-sector bodies have contact with the target group and have an overview of the availability of potential locations. A 'social public private partnership' between the food garden and the municipal council is one possible way of securing this. The food garden also brings in private funding while the municipal council contributes land and access to the target group.

Feasibility and uncertainties

Many people are enthusiastic about the plan for the set-up of an organic food garden. A plot of at least six hectares is required for the operation of this social enterprise providing voluntary work for 200 people. The management (yet to be recruited) must be professional in a variety of ways (including social skills and agricultural knowledge). Finding a suitable location within the city boundaries is a primary requirement but a difficult one to fulfil, as this requires active cooperation between the board and bodies such as the municipal council.

Solutions are required which jointly determine the feasibility of the 'social green enterprise' in the longer term. The main threat is the social feasibility. Is there sufficient interest among the intended target group – people on a very low income – to work as a volunteer on the food garden? The recruitment and maintenance of a group of 200 volunteers also requires structural cooperation between public-sector bodies and the food garden as a private organisation. Lastly, an arrangement is required to cushion any operating shortfalls in the years leading up to the garden's creation and to cover any financial risks in the operation of the food garden.