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UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY IN COMMUNITY COMPOSTING: IT'S ALL IN THE MIX

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SUMMARY

The emergence and development of a coherent and defined community composting sector, as with the commercial composting sector, is relatively new. There is some anecdotal and funding support evidence for the growth in, and diversity of, community composting, but there is very little comprehensive data that draws together the activities of the sector as a whole. This paper starts to address that gap by presenting a summary from a national survey on the nature of the community composting sector and shows that it comprises groups and organisations involved in a diverse range of activities. It also presents findings from participatory workshops with community composting groups and their stakeholders exploring the extent to which projects contribute to individual and community change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over recent years there has been an increasing focus on the role of the Third Sector in developing and delivering public services. This interest is also reflected in the Community Waste Sector (CWS), particularly in re-use, recycling and composting, and the sector is considered to make an important contribution to waste objectives (Williams *et al*, 2006). Defra (2007a) are developing a Third Sector Strategy and the Waste Strategy for England (Defra, 2007b) commits to making greater use of Third Sector expertise and to seeing the sector win a greater share of local authority contracts. New policies to build capacity in the sector are being supported through a number of initiatives (e.g. Futurebuilders, Waste Resources and Action Programme, Big Lottery Fund). Alongside this are calls for better understanding of, and evidence for, the impacts of the Third Sector in strengthening communities and delivering services. For example, the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) is collating evidence of the impacts of organisations across the sector.

This paper contributes to a better understanding of the nature and role of the community composting sector and explores the extent to which projects contribute to individual and community change. In considering these changes the paper focuses on the concepts of *outputs* and *outcomes*. Section 2 of this paper explains the difference in meaning between outputs and outcomes. Section 3 profiles the sector's activities and presents the outputs from community composting based on a national survey. Section 4 outlines the outcomes from community composting identified by practitioners and their stakeholders through participatory workshops.

2. WHAT IS MEANT BY *OUTPUTS* AND *OUTCOMES*

For individual groups, understanding and demonstrating the change their activities can bring about is important for business planning, reflection and evaluation. It can also help demonstrate the importance of activities to stakeholders including clients, funders and investors (nef, 2004). Demonstrating change is important for securing income and funding and therefore important for the development of the sector.

The concept of identifying the change brought about by a project is intuitive and long-standing. Traditionally, however, the *methods* used to identify and measure change have tended to be incongruent with the *concept* of change, for example, most focus has been on measuring the efficiency or productivity of a project rather than effectiveness and change (CES, 2008). In recent years this balance has started to shift, with voluntary and community organisations, funding bodies and more recently public policy advocating and focusing more on the quality and effectiveness of projects and the changes this leads to rather than just focusing on productivity (OTS, 2008; CES, 2008; Hart and Houghton, 2007; NCVO, 2004). As a result, a number of frameworks and methods for measuring and demonstrating change are emerging (e.g. Social Return on Investment, Social Audits, Prove and Improve) and there is likely to be greater standardisation as these become more developed (e.g. see OTS, 2008). One theme underpinning many of these methods is the relationship between *inputs*, *outputs*, *outcomes* and *impact* (definitions adapted from Cupitt and Ellis, 2007; Walker *et al*, 2000):

Inputs - are all the resources invested in a project's activity to achieve the outputs. Inputs are measured as a cost and include time, money and premises.

Outputs - are the direct, tangible and often easily quantifiable products from the activity, e.g. tonnes of waste collected, participation rates, number of training courses delivered.

Outcomes - are the medium to longer-term changes, benefits, learning or other effects that are less easy to quantify and happen as a result of the project's outputs. This could include not just the number of people trained but the change that training has brought about for the individual e.g. in terms of building skills, ability, confidence and employment prospects.

Impacts - the long-term effect or change, often at a higher or broader level than the original target of the project, to which the project together with other initiatives, has contributed.

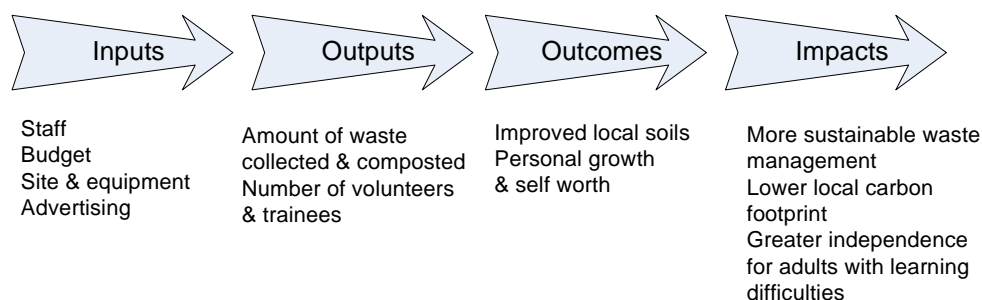


Figure 1: From inputs to impact, an illustrative example for a community composting project

This paper focuses on the outputs and outcomes of community composting activities. In understanding the relationship linking inputs to impacts illustrated in Figure 1, outputs and outcomes have very different meanings but in day-to-day practice they have often been used synonymously, leading to uncertainty and confusion (NCVO, 2004). This paper shows how understanding the nature of outputs and outcomes, and the distinction between them, is crucial to understanding the change a community composting project has made or could bring about.

In general, groups involved in community composting recognise the importance of evaluating and demonstrating change. However, meaningful evaluation is resource intensive and most community composting groups have limited resources. Where measurement is carried out it focuses almost exclusively on the relatively easy to count outputs rather than on outcomes which are less easy to identify and measure (Slater, 2007). The majority of groups measure at least some of their outputs. The most common include the quantity and type of material collected and composted, participation rates and involvement of volunteers and placements. The following section considers these *outputs* for the sector as a whole with results taken from a national survey profiling the community composting sector. Section 4 then discusses findings from working with individual groups and their stakeholders to explore their views of outcomes, i.e. the benefits and changes their project brings about.

3. COMMUNITY COMPOSTING ACTIVITY - FOCUS ON OUTPUTS

3.1 Data collection

This section presents results from a national survey of the community composting sector carried out in 2007 (covering calendar year 2006). A questionnaire was distributed to 193 members of composting and recycling networks across England, Scotland and Wales; 132 responses were received - a response rate of 68%. The full findings are reported in Slater, 2007.

3.2 Types of groups & organisations

The community composting sector includes a range of groups/organisations from informal collectives of individuals, small grant/charitable funded organisations, organisations relying on grants and tradable income, through to larger scale self-funded entities. This includes community groups, volunteer organisations, charities and social enterprises.

Survey results show that more composting groups are working informally without legal status compared to groups in the wider community waste sector. Around 38% of groups involved in community composting are people working informally in groups or as unincorporated groups with a governing document. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of organisations in the wider community waste sector are companies limited by guarantee (58%) and/or charities (57%) (Williams *et al*, 2005).

3.3 Regional distribution

Most community composting organisations are based in England (88%) where the most active regions in terms of quantities composted are the South West (20%) and the North (North West - 20%, North East - 14%, Yorkshire and Humberside - 22%) with relatively little activity reported for the Midlands, East of England and the South East.

Results show that London has the highest density of organisations but accounts for only 1% of material composted. This is due to the small scale of urban sites (city farms, allotments, community gardens) and that one-third of respondents in London are involved in education and promotion of composting rather than collecting and processing waste material.

3.4 Community composting and related activities

Activities that fall under the umbrella of community composting include community groups that: 1) collect/receive and process waste organic material; 2) run education campaigns; 3) promote home composting; 4) facilitate others to develop/promote community composting. Respondents carry out at least one of these activities and many are involved in more than one.

Overall 80% of organisations are involved in collecting and composting material and 20% are involved in forms of community composting activity other than collecting and composting. In addition, many organisations are also involved in other waste and/or non-waste activities.

Composting may be carried out alongside other recycling activities or more commonly, alongside non-waste activities such as running community gardens, city farms, local food production, day and residential services for adults with special needs, training and work integration schemes. Figure 2 shows the proportion of organisations that are involved in community composting only, and the proportion that are involved in composting as well as the recycling of other materials and/or non-waste related activities. This shows that there is no single combination of activities that dominates the community composting sector; rather the activities in which organisations are involved are spread across the mix of options.

The largest community composting sites are more likely to be run by organisations dedicated to composting, whereas the smaller sites are more likely to be run by organisations involved in a range of activities. For 40% of organisations, undertaking composting is their main objective and activity. For the majority (60%), composting is an activity which complements other social and environmental activities and objectives.

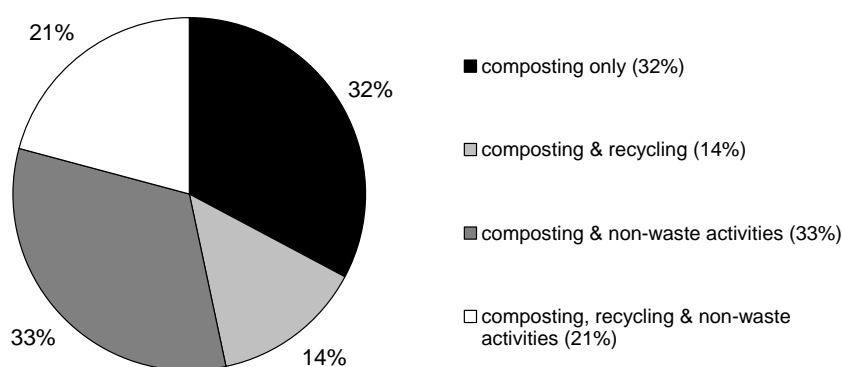


Figure 2: Percentage of organisations involved in composting only, composting and recycling and/or non-waste activities

3.5 Number of sites and material composted

Findings show that 84 organisations are involved in collecting/receiving and composting material at 121 sites. When extrapolated to account for non-respondents this increases to an estimated 170 sites. The proximity principle is an important element of sustainability and underpins the ethos of community composting. This is reflected in the profile of the sector with features such as decentralisation and small-scale activities showing up strongly; around half of sites process ≤ 10 tonnes per annum (tpa) and two-thirds process ≤ 30 tpa. Twenty eight sites process ≥ 100 tpa (including three that process ≥ 1000 tpa) which collectively accounted for 93% of all material composted by the sector. Most respondents run one site, with 12 organisations running multiple sites.

Responses show that approximately 20.5k tonnes of material was composted at community run sites in 2006. When extrapolated to account for non-respondents this increases to an estimated 21.5k. It is important to note that this figure relates specifically to composting carried out at community sites. The sector also contributes to organic material diverted from landfill through educational and promotional activity, e.g. master composter schemes that promote home composting. In addition, the sector also contributes to landfill diversion by collecting organic material and transporting it to commercial sites - estimates for the quantities collected have not been included in the survey data as the composting is carried out at commercial rather than community run sites.

To-date the development of the sector has relied predominantly on composting garden waste. Around 80% of sites compost garden waste exclusively - mainly from households but also from local authorities' parks and gardens and allotments and community gardens. Around 13% of sites process a mixture of garden and food waste (mostly meat excluded). Results showed that food waste composting is a developing area for the sector and a number of organisations are in the process of planning or implementing food waste collection and composting schemes.

Findings show that most sites (70%) offer a 'bring site' facility (where householders or local authorities bring their garden waste to the site) - around half of these rely exclusively on this method and half combine it with a collection method, either collecting from the kerbside or from household waste recycling centres. Around 30% of sites rely exclusively on kerbside or door-to-door collections, accounting for 25% of all material composted by community groups.

3.6 People involved in community composting - volunteers, trainees and staff

The community composting sector offers significant opportunities for volunteering. Results show that over 1,000 volunteers were involved with the sector in 2006. There were also trainee opportunities or placements for 212 people and 178 core, paid staff. Results in Table 1 show that around three-quarters of all workers are volunteers and over 95% of these works part-time. As with other areas of the community composting sector the survey found no 'one' typical pattern related to staff and volunteer opportunities.

Table 1: Number of core paid staff, trainees, placements and volunteers involved in community composting activities on a full-time or part-time basis

Category	Number of workers		Total workers full and part-time
	full-time	part-time	
Core, paid staff	93	85	178
Trainees and placements	73	139	212
Volunteers	33	968	1001
Total	199	1192	1391

3.7 Working with Local Authorities

The majority of groups (82%) have some type of working relationship with their Local Authority. Most commonly (around 50% of groups) this is an informal arrangement based around communication (although the extent to which this communication is regular and supportive is patchy across the sector). Building dialogue with a local authority is an important early stage in a group’s development to help foster understanding and awareness between the group and the authority. Respondents commented on the importance of ongoing communication with authorities whilst acknowledging this can be a lengthy and time consuming process. In one case it had taken 3 years of working closely with an authority and demonstrating capability and potential for the authority to agree to pay recycling credits.

Around one-third of organisations receive some form of grant funding from local authorities, and in some cases this may be underpinned by a Service Level Agreement (SLA). Around 20% of organisations have a SLA - a specific agreement between the organisation and authority that stimulates agreed performance outcomes. Only 7% of respondents have full service contracts with their authority.

4. COMMUNITY COMPOSTING ACTIVITY - IDENTIFYING *OUTCOMES*

Section 3 presented findings from a survey which largely focused on collecting data about the *outputs* of community composting activities. In the past, measuring activities across all sectors has tended to focus on outputs and this is reflected in the community composting sector. However, this is only part of the story. Although less easy to identify and often more resource intensive to count, *outcomes* also need to be captured to understand the change composting projects bring about. Identifying what outcomes are important to different stakeholders is a necessary first step in measuring outcomes. The results presented in this section are taken from a series of participatory workshops designed to help practitioners take that first step and identify important outcomes of their community composting activities with their stakeholders.

4.1 Data Collection

Nine participatory workshops were carried out in two linked rounds. Round 1 consisted of four regional workshops with practitioners and explored activities, challenges and successes. Round 2 consisted of five workshops with individual groups and focused on their activities, outputs and impacts. The successes and challenges from the Round 1 workshops have been reported elsewhere (see Slater and Frederickson, 2008). This section focuses on the outcomes explored in

the Round 2 workshops supplemented with findings from Round 1 workshops and the survey results where appropriate.

In Round 2 five participatory workshops were carried out with individual composting groups and a representative range of their key stakeholders. Typically these included the project manager, employees and volunteers, board members, user groups and beneficiaries including placements, residents, local councils, local agencies and schools. Each of the five groups was familiar with the research project and had participated in the Round 1 workshops. The groups were selected to take into account the diversity of composting and complementary activities outlined in Section 3.

4.2 Identifying outcomes

As previously discussed, outcomes relate to the medium to long-term changes or benefits that a project brings about (see page 2). The outcomes identified by the range of stakeholders represented in the five workshops can be grouped under the headings of *individual change* and *community change*. This change at the individual or community level comes from a number of benefits that stakeholders considered their projects deliver. These benefits together with brief explanations are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Benefits related to individual and community change

	Benefit	What it means
Individual change	Improving health and well-being	People are physically and mentally healthier People feel better about themselves
	Feelings of safety and belonging	People feel safer have a sense of belonging, and crime is reduced
	Engaging in meaningful activity	People take part in meaningful activity through involvement with the project and may move towards other meaningful activity (e.g. employment, or volunteering, independent living)
	Engaging in pro-social / pro-environmental behaviour	People practice positive environmental and pro-social behaviour
Community change	Social benefits for the community	Community cohesion, communities are more active and engaged
	Environmental benefits for the community	The quality of the environment is improved (air quality, tidy streets, green space, reduced transport, CO ² and CH ⁴ emissions)
	Economic benefits for the community	People are better off financially. There are more opportunities to spend and keep money within the local economy.

4.2.1 Individual change

Broadly speaking for community composting projects, the importance of change at an individual level, particularly for meaningful activity, wellbeing and belonging, reflects the extent to which groups involve placements, trainees and volunteers.

Health and wellbeing benefits together with benefits from meaningful activity and learning new skills were particularly emphasised for projects working with vulnerable groups or volunteers. Health and wellbeing issues around personal development and growth, confidence and self-esteem came out the strongest for projects working with vulnerable groups and were also important for groups with a high reliance on volunteers. Similarly, learning new skills relevant to work environments were important for groups working with vulnerable groups and new skills related to composting and wider areas of sustainability were important to volunteers. There was also considered to be some wellbeing for householders participating in schemes, especially for isolated individuals, albeit to a lesser degree than for those working directly with the project.

All groups identified an increased sense of belonging as an important benefit – for workers in all projects and for householders in most of the projects. Stakeholders also felt that an increased sense of belonging can also lead to people feeling safer within their communities. However, stakeholders for one group working in a deprived inner-city area identified a ‘feeling of safety’ for residents as an important outcome resulting from the regular presence of collection operatives.

Engaging in meaningful work activity was important to all stakeholders directly involved in projects – particularly for clients and placements (e.g. vulnerable groups) but also for volunteers looking to get involved with their communities and develop social interaction and for directors, trustees and staff in terms of their belief, enthusiasm and commitment to a role that serves and benefits the community.

Workshop participants considered householders who use a scheme’s services and volunteers who work on schemes are the two groups most likely to engage in more pro-social and environmental behaviour as a result of this involvement. According to householders at the workshops there can be a direct effect of increasing recycling behaviour through participation in community composting schemes and also an indirect effect where residents who are more aware, understand and participate in one area of environmental and social sustainability this will have a ripple effect and encourage participation in other areas.

It is important to note that these benefits for the individual will interlink and influence each other. So for example, individuals engaged in meaningful activity and developing new skills are also likely to develop a sense of belonging which will positively impact on their feelings of wellbeing. It is also important to recognise that these outcomes are likely to have longer-term impact over and above involvement with, and possibly duration of, the project.

4.2.2 Community change

Bringing about positive community change was important for all five workshop groups; however the balance between importance of individual change and community change appeared layered and varied between groups. For groups that target vulnerable groups and/or rely on volunteer support, benefits for individuals directly involved in the project was a core focus, with benefits for participating householders and the wider community being an important second layer. In

contrast, for groups where projects have developed out of local community action and evolved to provide several services for the local community individual and community benefits were of more equal importance.

The social change identified by stakeholders at the community level came through a number of routes, including; sense of belonging, opportunities for socialising and providing a 'social hub', developing trust and understanding - both of services and different groups. Empowerment was also considered important - either for individuals working in the project or in the sense of helping householders to 'do their bit'. Extending this to the wider community, stakeholders in two workshops spoke of the importance of having residents and users of the project as part of the decision making process. Social change benefits are fostered through a combination of the ripple effect of individual change and the wider role the groups play in their communities.

The outcomes identified that relate to environmental change (i.e. changes in the physical environment) were similar across all workshops. Most of these relate to the perceived benefits of providing a local service and were generally viewed by stakeholders in terms of reducing the local carbon footprint - less waste to landfill, reducing transport movements and 'waste' miles, utilising the composted material locally with a view to improving soil structure and quality. Other outcomes included cleanliness and visible improvements to the local area. For stakeholders from the inner-city based workshop this related to cleaner areas on the estates and fewer problems from vermin as a result of removing food waste from the general waste stream and collecting it door-to-door. For stakeholders in the suburban and rural based workshops this related to fewer incidents of fly-tipping and fewer bonfires in gardens / allotments. The wider conservation initiatives many of the groups engage in also contribute to environmental change.

Generally speaking, fewer economic outcomes were identified across the five workshops compared to the other areas of community change. However, one workshop stood out in terms of activity in the local economy. Relatively speaking this group is a significant employer locally, it makes available low-cost resources through re-use and recycling activities, it sells 'green products' and generates economic activity from the sale of local and organic produce in their café (providing a distribution outlet for local producers and retail outlet for local consumers). The four other groups all employed a small number of staff, providing limited local employment opportunities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that the community composting sector comprises groups and organisations involved in a diverse range of activities. Around one-third of groups are engaged in community composting exclusively, and two-thirds are also engaged with other recycling and/or non-waste related activities. For the majority of groups (60%) composting is not their main focus, rather it is an important activity which complements other social and environmental objectives. These groups may also be involved in other waste related activities such as reduction, re-use and recycling and 'greening' purchasing habits. They may also be involved in other environmental but not directly waste related activities, such as conservation and local food production, and some groups provide a therapeutic work environment, training and intermediate labour market opportunities for marginalised groups including adults with learning disabilities and individuals who are long-term unemployed.

Recognising the broad diversity in the community composting sector and acknowledging the changes composting activities can bring about often span across different policy agendas are

important factors in helping to understand what the sector can offer and how it can be supported. This paper has shown that the sector is about much more than just composting in terms of quantities and types of organic waste composted. It has presented a number of important benefits identified by a range of different stakeholders, both for individuals engaged in projects and also for the wider community. Further work is now needed to develop effective tools for measuring and evaluating the benefits identified.

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