

Perception of FTF

Farming the Future understands the issues, and feels like part of the movement

One of the reasons our participants felt that Farming the Future was valuable was because we have taken the time to deeply understand the system we fund. This makes us feel, to some, like “part of the movement.” Participants felt that we are “doing a really good job to move forward agroecological and socially just farming” and have made food and farming “more visible,” making “people think more about some of the big questions.” We also heard that we are ensuring “that voices that have been less heard are much better engaged and included.”

We heard that “Farming the Future has made efforts to understand the issue—so we don’t have to educate the funders as we go. It’s important that as funders you’ve taken on that responsibility.” Additionally, we heard that the network feels it has “a really good dialogue” with us, and that they are able to “tell the truth” with us.

This makes us different from other funders, many of whom “still fund in silos.” We heard that FTF should “take credit for seeing the system.”

The way we fund has been positive in many ways

Funding a range of organisations – type, size, approach

Participants in the sessions appreciated the way Farming the Future had funded a wide range of both sizes and types of organisations.

In terms of organisation size, for example, we heard that we have “given opportunities for funding to much smaller organisations who would otherwise struggle,” and that “the nice thing about Farming the Future has been that it funds small organisations who don’t have many years’ track record and helps them grow.” At the same time, we have funded “big players.” While some people found that it was “really great to have backing from FTF to bring those collaborations together [between small and larger organisations],” others had “mixed feelings.” This ambivalence came down to a sense that, while on the one hand, it was important for larger organisations to be involved and to learn from some of the smaller, newer and perhaps more innovative organisations, at the same time they wondered whether this was the most effective use of our resources.

There was also a recognition that sometimes the diversity of organisations that FTF has funded can pose a challenge in terms of trying to collaborate, form new partnerships, and accommodate so many different perspectives and organisational identities.

Enabling connections

We heard that by bringing a “large number of groups together” and acting as a “great forum to meet people,” the way we operate has done much to enable connections within the movement. We have “brought people together” and brought them “out of the woodwork.”

We heard that “being part of the network means Farming the Future has been able to connect us with organisations we wouldn’t otherwise have reached, including audiences.”

In this regard, our participants repeatedly emphasised that they would love to see more in person gatherings as this becomes possible once again.

Collaboration

Participants in the listening sessions had very mixed feelings about collaboration. Almost every time collaboration came up, comments were two-sided, with people recognising the benefits it has brought, whilst also sharing the various difficulties that our approach has given rise to.

On the positive side, we heard that people feel they “work more closely with others than three years ago.” Collaborations have revealed “intersections you wouldn’t expect,” can be valuable for movement building, and “have immense potential when done well.” One participant said that our biggest impact has been “in showing that a collaborative model is possible.”

On the more negative side, we heard that sometimes the collaborations that have arisen from our requirement to collaborate have been “tokenistic,” or a “name grabbing exercise to get in with the organisations that are currently on trend and likely to secure funding.” In this context, people felt that they had to ‘pretend’ to meet the criteria, while “not all collaborations were the best fit.” This relates to a point made by several participants that “there is an assumption that all groups are on the same page all the time,” and that “this is a difficulty in forced collaboration.”

What needs to change?

Internal

Funding

Duration

One message that came through loud and clear during the sessions was that single-year funding is “a big challenge.” We heard that “if you have to bring in new staff or set up new things, a year creates a real toll for the organisation that’s holding it,” and that “the short-termism of the grant doesn’t necessarily give time to set up structures, staffing, working together.”

Longer term funding is what is needed by the movement; participants want us to “invest... in organisations and ideas...more of a journey, rather than a specific project.”

Who is funded

Participants variously suggested funding individuals (with some thoughts about how to approach this e.g. providing access to skills rather than finance), more non-charities (with the idea of ‘venture charity’ being posed by one participant). Others were opposed to funding individuals as this would require “a very different skill set/set of criteria.”

Some participants suggested that there be rules around how many grants an individual organisation can receive in any one grant round, “in order for them to focus their energy, achieve long term results and be able to communicate that effectively.”

Funding approach/type of funding

We received a range of suggestions from participants about different approaches to funding that might benefit the movement, including:

- Micro-granting. A smaller pot available for smaller, newer organisations with much lower barriers to access.
 - “It’s hard for small organisations to get onto ‘the ladder’”

- Core funding. There was a point made that this can be difficult to reconcile with the requirement to collaborate.
 - o “funders have the freedom to spend their ££ where they see objectives. In my experience, if organisations do not have core funding to have that infrastructure, project funding is a waste in the long term. If you don’t have the core funder to underpin the work being done, every project will come and go. If there isn’t the infrastructure to make those project achieve impact it will be like going around in circles over time.”
 - o Participants need “more time and space.”
- Capacity building funding.
 - o “You need to take away this idea that there are important goals to be reached and targets.”
 - o “People need to be able to grow and build skills and confidence.”
 - o This could include funds for collaboration building.

Amount of funding

While participants were happy that Farming the Future had brought more money into the sector (aside from those who had questions about whether this was, in fact, the case—see in the questions section below), there was a sense that the “division o[f] that funding into multiple small pots has left organisations having to support a number of projects that sometimes only scrape the surface of an issue and aren’t able to realise their full potential.”

Another participant said that the project they have done with funding from Farming the Future involved “a huge amount of work” for “very modest funds.” While this was said to be “all good,” it seems likely that a better recognition of the work that goes into some of these projects might make a case for *deeper* rather than just *wider* funding.

‘Beyond funding’

Improving our approach to and support for collaboration

In order for collaboration to work, we heard that there needs to be more of an acknowledgement from FTF that collaboration is “messy” and “challenging, and takes a fair bit of time to work this out and build trust.” Part of this means providing “more support” around collaboration—“not just a webinar but actually convening meetings with co-created agendas.” Several times, the point was raised that there really needs to be in person meetings for this to work to its full potential. There is also room for FTF to work with the diverse types of work that organisations do, and to make sure that these different ways of working are acknowledged and recognised within collaborations.

Furthermore, we heard that it’s important for us to recognise and seek to balance the tension that can arise between collaboration and the potential for competition: “people are keen for the movement to work and others to succeed, but are also facing their own pressures and trying to make things work in their areas.” If this tension isn’t addressed, this can lead to “tactical” behaviour which can “feel a bit uncomfortable.” This dynamic can be exacerbated by the fact that “for the funding available, collaboration is resource heavy.”

Additionally, in order for collaboration to achieve the goals we want it to around movement building, it’s important to acknowledge the fact that “if you are suddenly required to collaborate, you have a tendency to pick your friend, which doesn’t help to break down the silo.” This raises further questions around the support FTF can provide around forming effective collaborations.

Access to skills as well as money

“How about funding some kind of agency... Is there a way to draw on existing skills?” For instance, communication skills were one type that was suggested here.

Creating more space for meeting and networking

This idea of cultivating more “safe” spaces for the movement to meet and build connections came up over and over again. Participants felt that FTF should be doing more than just introducing people, but should be playing a “strong central coordination role,” actively “making space and time to build the movement.”

FTF should be convening and curating spaces for connections over a range of key issues, from big picture strategic partnerships, to more operational conversations about, for instance, “the software [people] use, and the mechanics of making things work.” Where possible, participants felt these meetings should be in person—this makes it easier to build trust and relationships. At the same time, participants did recognise that online events have been inclusive, and that this digital space has been “rich” and “has allowed for more collaborations.” One suggestion was to provide an “occasional offering” for “strategic dialogue,” for example a day before or after the ORFC “for networks to engage in focused strategic thinking.” FTF should be playing the role of a connector, here.

Participants also saw a role for FTF to enable connections with those beyond the food and farming movement, from communicators, to artists, to those working in areas like poverty and wealth inequality.

Communication

While this didn’t come up as a major point, several participants felt that there was a role for FTF to help the movement to convey “knowledge through to society, which doesn’t know what farming can do.”

Impact

Some participants felt that there was a need for FTF to be clearer about how we are understanding impact—and that this could usefully be discussed and shared before people begin their projects.

The application process

Due diligence

There are places where we could improve our application process for applicants. For instance, as we all know, the process of due diligence this year has been “very arduous.”

Applications themselves

Beyond this, though, there is scope for us to review our entire application process, as participants suggested that “there needs to be thought about the amount of time that has to go into an application relative to how much funding is getting given out.”

“There must be a way to short-cut this process!” said one participant.

Other ways some participants felt our application process could be improved were:

- Through greater clarity on how applications are assessed; and

- Avoiding conflicts of interest (especially as between advisors and grants)
 - Some participants were hesitant about the ambassadors' role in grant decision-making, with one preferring the funders to have the "final say."

The Expression of Interest process we used in 2021 were generally found to be "great in theory," but there was some hesitance around how this had worked in practice. Participants didn't feel it was realistic to expect grant seekers to comment on one another's applications as they are already so pressed for time.

There was also a general sense that we could do more to recognise the power difference between us as funders and those within the movement. One participant said that "we are being asked to reflect deeply about the work of a funder when for a lot of us our work is intense and busy. But if we get funding to do this kind of deep reflection for our own organizations, that could be amazing... Many organisations involved in the movement do not have the time or funding to reflect in this way. And to know that wages are covered long-term."

In practice, this might require FTF to explore how it can 'flip' the application process so that FTF as the funder bears a greater share of the burden: "Why is the onus on us to reach out to funders and not the other way around?"

Ideas around how this approach could be implemented from participants included:

- FTF describes its long-term goal, and then takes on the responsibility of looking at the work being done by the movement to understand who it could fund to achieve that goal – though there was an acknowledgement that this approach would need to be careful not to only give grants to those already 'in the club';
- Removing or minimising as far as possible the application process for any small grants (e.g. under £3k) given out;
- Match-making applicants done by FTF – we identify who is working on similar things, and bring them together.

Ultimately, this came down to the matter of trust, which came up over and over again during the sessions. "Funders need to trust us to know what we need to do," said one participant.

External

Spreading the word

Some of our participants had the sense that Farming the Future is not well-known beyond those who are already involved. People shared that they had come across FTF by chance, and wanted to know what we were doing about finding new partners. This suggests that there is work to be done to evaluate whether our closed grant pool approach is fit for purpose? On the other hand, there were several in the equity session (more details [here](#)) who were worried about the pool becoming too open and "diluting" the work.

More funder conversations

Participants identified that one of FTF's impacts has been around "encouraging more funders to get involved." At the same time, others suggested FTF could be having more conversations with other funders in order to reduce duplication and bring more money into the collective for wider distribution.

Key challenges and areas of focus

A wide range of challenges, opportunities and areas of focus arose in discussions with participants. It was clear participants felt that “Farming the Future shouldn’t focus on just one issue—the ecosystem needs all parts to work well.”

Policy influencing and lobbying

The biggest issue that came up amongst participants as a key area was policy and lobbying—both in terms of challenges and dangers, as well as possible opportunities, such as the National Food Strategy. Some particular issues arising that will require attention and that organisations will be focusing on in this area included:

- Responding to post-Brexit changes like ELMS. This might require FTF to move more squarely into “big policy lobbying and advocacy”;
- Addressing deregulation;
- Bridging policy to practice – bringing practitioners, community/local-level actors into policy;
- Bridging ideological chasms – within the sector and within government;
- Coalitions – collaborations across the sector feeding into policy jointly;
- Shaping political parties outside of government – keeping an eye on the future;
- Devolved government policy;
- The planning system – how can work in this area enable the work of the movement in a new way e.g. by making setting up CSAs more viable, or making rural housing more accessible for beginning farmers or tenants.

In terms of how this work is funded, there was a sense that effective policy work requires core, long-term funding. “We don’t get warning of when we might need to respond,” said one participant. “We need funding to respond to policy,” said another, “Often there is no time to source funding as deadlines are very short and we need funding in place already.”

Land

Another major area of focus that arose amongst participants was that of land. As one participant said, “it all comes down to land.” Accessing land is “almost impossible,” especially for smaller organisations or new entrants.

Local issues: with or without the local authority

Many participants shared that focusing work on local or regional scales was a key focus, with one participant saying that “interfacing with local authorities is really important.” This was partly a result of frustration and disillusion with the likelihood of achieving change at a national level thanks to the current “dystopian” political climate, but also for more positive reasons. For instance, some participants saw possibility in collaborations with the “local public sector around building infrastructure for local food distribution systems.”

Cross-sector collaboration & movement building

Many of the participants were interested in seeing more collaboration and conversation happening in a cross-sector manner, such as “state-commons collaborations.” Participants saw the value in engaging with other movements such as BLM and racial justice, renters’ and housing organisers, education activists and those working on health.

Additionally, we heard that FTF should support the movement to “start to work together before we start to reach out to a larger audience.” This could involve directing our funding to “network building across the movement enabling and supporting it to develop relationships as

well as provide trainings that will help the movement to reach out further as a united front.” However, it would be important for this work to “come from within” rather than being “imposed.”

Supporting those ‘already doing the work’

This tied into a desire from some participants to ensure FTF continues to support existing organisations who have been working in this space for many years and sometimes feel they are “struggling to be heard” as “bigger organisations...jump... on the bandwagon.”

Racial justice

Participants shared that they would like to see FTF “continue its work to address diversity & inclusion, particularly to tackle racial injustice in the sector.”

Young people & new entrants

Participants saw working with young people and attracting young people to the sector as a major upcoming (or already existing) challenge and opportunity. Young people were seen as “reinforcements...waiting in the wings,” or as “enthusiastic,” with the “energy to push things forward.” An interesting point was made about ensuring collaboration and connection between younger and older generations, the latter of which have “accumulated experience and wisdom” which they can pass down to the former.

Relatedly, many participants saw supporting new entrants—with training, access to land and equipment, and mentorship and community—as vital for the movement going forward.

Communications

There was a sense amongst participants that there is a need for the movement to “improve our communications” through “collaborative comms and support getting our messaging and work outside the echo chamber.”

Food insecurity and education

There were some comments made about the importance of working against the barriers people face to accessing good food—whether this is a matter of poverty, income or wealth inequality (e.g. when it comes to food insecurity), or education.

Research

Some participants identified the need for more research to support the movement, especially around issues of health and economic justice.

Questions from participants we may want to engage with

- Has more money come into the movement? Or has funding been diverted—is there any evidence around this?
- Is the drive for carbon and biodiversity offsetting an issue that could creep into FTF?
- What’s happened to the comms project?
- Is FTF against working with ‘major corporates’? Is there a need for FTF to provide clarity on this?

Recommendations

Things to keep

- Keep “seeing the system”
- Keep funding “a wide range of both sizes and types of organisations”

Things to start doing

- Provide support for collaboration (through e.g. providing access to skills, facilitating meetings to enable effective collaboration, coaching for collaborations) and make more investments, recognising the time, energy and resources it takes to collaborate well
- Micro-granting
- Core funding
- Capacity-building funding

Things to improve or do more of

- More (in person) gatherings
 - Going beyond making introductions—convening space for those who are working on the same issues, facing the same problems
 - Including making connections with those beyond the food and farming movement, from communicators, to artists, to those working in areas like poverty and wealth inequality.
- Provide support for collaboration (skills/facilitation to enable) and / or more investment to recognise time it takes to do this well
- Be clearer about how we understand impact and communicate this to the network
- Our application process
 - Greater clarity on how applications are assessed
- Shore up our approach to conflicts of interest—whether perceived or otherwise
- Do more to recognise the power difference between us as funders and those within the movement—e.g. through ‘flipping’ the application process so that FTF as the funder bears a greater share of the burden
- Continue to build trust
- Ensure the ‘closed pool’ approach is fit for purpose

Things to lose

- Single-year funding (for the most part)
- Any expectation for applicants to comment on one another's' applications—they do not have time for this

To see the full notes from both sessions (roughly organised) [here](#).