

A CONVERSATION

A three-way conversation, reflecting on and learnings from the CSO survey

The survey to map *Civil Society Capacity in Europe on Sustainable and Healthy Diets* was carried out by Harriet Williams (HW) and Jon Cracknell (JC) from The Hour Is Late, a philanthropic sector consultancy based in the UK. Marinke van Riet (MVR) caught up with Jon and Harriet in April 2022 to reflect on some of the key findings and lessons of conducting such a survey – a first for HFHP.

MVR: Lovely to meet you, Jon and Harriet, and thank you for making the time to reflect with me – as a newcomer to HFHP. Let's start with some overall observations. The survey was carried out between July and September 2021 and received responses from 104 civil society organisations based in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, France, the UK and those with an EU-wide focus. As far as we know, this is the first attempt to compare and contrast capacity for diets work across multiple countries. What are some of your general reflections on the project's strengths and weaknesses?

JC/HW: The overall response rate was 45% which is actually quite good for a survey of this kind. In the countries where we hired research assistants to chase up responses this definitely boosted participation rates, especially in Spain, France and the UK, where the assistants were food and farm campaigners themselves, with good contacts among survey recipients. If this exercise is repeated, funders could be asked to help circulate and introduce the survey too, as this can lift response rates.

The survey was quite long and in future HFHP may want to consider a mixed methodology, where a shorter general survey element is complemented by in-depth interviews with a small number of organisations in each country, chosen to be representative of the breadth and diversity of civil society work on food and diets. Semi-structured interviews could also be a way to 'build out' the mapping into additional countries. All that being said, this was a rewarding project to work on. We thank all the organisations who took time to answer the survey and we think it yielded some fascinating insights for HFHP and its partners to reflect on in the months ahead.

Let's talk about some of the findings -which we will also dig into in the B(re)aking Bread session and in the other parts of the April issue of the What's Cooking Newsletter. In your opinion which findings stand out more and provide clear food for thought... and action for HFHP?

The survey is a revealing snapshot of civil society groups working on sustainable and healthy diets.

The relatively small number of respondents (no more than 27 in any single country) limits the detail and reliability of the picture that emerges – that said, one thing that stood out to us is the sheer diversity of organisations involved, from local food networks to international NGOs, climate campaigns to faith groups.

Not surprisingly, these groups differ in what they set out to achieve through working on sustainable diets, although concerns about climate change, animal welfare and sustainable rural communities are common threads for many and public health would undoubtedly appear in this list too, if more health organisations had participated.

The survey does not provide easy answers on how to unite these groups in common purpose, collaborative action or practical campaign strategies, but the results do suggest areas where HFHP might invite further conversations among its community. For instance, the questions elicited a wide range of opinions on topics related to 'less and/or better' meat, from those who whole-heartedly embrace less but not better (or the other way around), to those who avoid this framing due to nervousness about the 'culture war' developing around meat. Tensions like this could present a challenge to some of the priorities for action and investment identified elsewhere in the survey. For instance, the strengthening and broadening of civil society coalitions pops up repeatedly as a theme, but what does that look like among groups with diverse values and end goals, who may differ in what they perceive as a 'win'?

Respondents also named policy advocacy and public campaigning among the strategies with most potential to increase the sector's impact. Interestingly (to us) only respondents with an EU-wide focus named strategic communications among their top strategies for additional impact; if anything we expected this to feature more prominently in light of the competing 'storylines' told about diets and meat in popular and political culture.

The questions relating to movement skills give a good overview of the diversity and status of the different movements in the countries surveyed and what HFHP could do in linking and learning within, among and across different parts of this community.

The advice to funders is another stand-out section for us. Several of the messages – such as the call for more flexible, long-term funds and the need to push towards systems change – echo the findings of similar surveys The Hour Is Late has run on other civil society movements.

The robustness of some findings is limited by the small sample size. For instance, the data on amounts of funding for sustainable diets work only tells us about the funding landscape for these 104 CSOs, not the wider funding landscape in the countries they work in.

The list of top policy asks should be treated with caution; we cannot say this represents the 'wish list' of the movement overall. Likewise, the views on peers, partners and networks are partial. The extent and strength of existing civil society coalitions may be better assessed by interviews and a mapping started from the networks themselves (rather than a survey only completed by a few of their members).

Overall, the survey results invite further discussion and targeted conversations, so it is great to see HFHP now taking this up by organising B(re)aking Bread sessions, a write-up in What's Cooking and sharing the anonymised data with the national networks.

What were some of the findings that you had hoped to see, which didn't (yet) materialise?

Ideally, we would have liked a fuller picture of the funding available to civil society groups in each country. This could have helped HFHP to identify gaps – and hence priorities for the HFHP pooled fund. However, this information is difficult to compile via a survey of funding recipients, unless the response rate is much

higher. It may be helpful at some stage to do a study on the 'supply' side of the grants market, which identifies the main philanthropic funders of sustainable diets work in each country and maps their grant investments. This might miss important sources of income (e.g. government grants or membership fees) but could go some way to answering the question of what total funding is available to food and diets work. What we can be certain about, is that groups in this sector perceive a lot of funding gaps and challenges, relating to funder priorities and practices as well as the total sums available. Some of these will be concerns that funders have heard from grantees working on other issues, and with its intention to convene and coordinate funders as well as to support civil society groups, we hope that HFHP can promote thoughtful and effective philanthropy regards topics of such importance for planetary and public health.