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Apart from Jordan and Even, I don't think anyone else noticed that the carrots were missing. The two signature dishes created by chef Even Bakke during our workshop went down a treat. Both vegetarian, and one inspired by Iranian cuisine, they typified the exciting things happening in Sweden's public kitchens. They also provided the perfect finale to our workshop on food, social innovation and cities that took place as part of the London Unusual Suspects Festival.

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Behind the Unusual Suspects concept was a plan to highlight the benefits of working with a variety of different organisations. Cross-sectoral collaboration is another way to put it.

Breaking Silos in Cities

For those within the URBACT community, this way of working is already well-established. Our requirement that each participating city forms an URBACT Local Support Group (ULSG) encourages this. Designed to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are round the table, it can also provide a platform for new forms of collaboration within cities. In this respect, the programme often provides an ideal platform to connect unusual suspects and to trigger social innovation.

Earlier this week I ended up in (yet another) long discussion about the meaning of social innovation. I was thankful to something that happened during our London workshop during that discussion. There, Sara Jervfors, the Lead Partner of our Diet for a Green Planet pilot project, remarked that it was only when she became part of URBACT that she realised that what they

are doing in Södertälje is social innovation. Her comment drew smiles from an audience familiar with the tired debate of defining social innovation, who having listened to her story had already understood that this is it in action.



So, What's Happening in Swedish Kitchens?

The work that Sara and Even are involved in, is quite inspiring. As with many effective interventions, it relies on a simple premise. How can we use the spending power of public kitchens to support local producers, stimulate organic farming and encourage healthy eating? This is what Swedish municipalities have been doing since 2001, through the buying power of their school and residential care meal budgets. The Diet project – now being transferred to other cities as part of the pilot – provides an excellent example of an integrated urban development approach, with economic, environmental and social results.

Taking a step back, not so long ago school meals in Södertälje and Gothenburg were like many across Europe. Kitchens had been removed and the catering contracts were outsourced to agribusinesses trucking mass produced meals in from outside. There was no link to local producers and, as Sara explained, kitchen staff had no culinary skills. All they had to do was remove package wrappers!

Rebuilding Culinary Skills in School Kitchens

The situation now is quite different. Each school has its own kitchen staffed by trained cooks. There is a commitment to buying local, and to buying organic wherever possible. Specific targets have been set, and in Södertälje the percentage of organic food used has jumped from 5% in 2005 to 50% today. There is a commitment to reducing waste and to reusing leftovers. Chef Even confessed that his experiments with bread have included fish bread – fortunately none of the kids noticed! Schools are also encouraging pupils to reduce their meat intake, which is only available two days each week. Also, pupils are entitled to a free school meal every day.

Bringing Parents and Schools Together

Södertälje has two main claims to fame. First, it was the birthplace of tennis ace Bjorn Borg. Nowadays, it is better known as a highly diverse city which has taken in more Iraqi refugees

than the entire United States and Canada combined. Consequently, schools have pupils from all over the world, with a rich mix of languages and cultures. One of the challenges for migrant parents is lack of knowledge about the school system, low proficiency in the host language and a lack of confidence dealing with institutions.

In Södertälje schools have invited migrant parents – usually Mums- to get involved in working with school staff to create recipes with available ingredients based on their own cuisine. This has many spin off benefits. Kids see their parents in school, building relationships with staff. They also see their culture in school, in a form they can eat! Overall, it enhances the sense of community visibility and respect within the school system.

Together, parents and school staff have produced a book of recipes that is being extended and translated as part of the URBACT pilot. For me, this is a great story of unusual suspects in action. And ultimately, this work is addressing high-level EU2020 goals by reducing levels of CO2 emissions.

So, a big thanks to the organisers of the Unusual Suspects Festival – SIX, Collaborate and the Gulbenkian Foundation – for providing a platform to share the Diet and Sustainable Food in Urban Community project work. Maybe the festival format is one that other URBACT cities would like to consider in future. If so, then get in touch!

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