Paper Title: ***From Farm to Fork: An Assessment of Collaborative Supply Relationships to underpin Food Tourism*.**

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Internationally, the food sector appears to be thriving and has excellent growth prospects. In a tourism context food is considered as a major element of tourism strategy, it is accepted as a primary motivator in destination choice and related tourist desires for sense of the authentic. In Ireland, food production, distribution, marketing and food tourism are the combined remit of a number of policy bodies. In a competitive economic environment, policy makers advocate the cultivation of food culture through greater supply chain collaboration as a means to improving product quality, customer satisfaction and competitiveness. This paper presents the findings of an in-depth consultation process with a wide sample of stakeholder groups to propose a framework of tangible recommendations to enhance direct supply chain relationships in food tourism and food service operations. It is envisaged that this research will act as a reference point for policy makers to guide, support, facilitate and assist hospitality industry and food producers to collaborate and form sustainable strategic relationships to support food tourism.

Background

Ireland has experienced a change in fortunes over the last four years which has led to a re-appraisal of the value of indigenous manufacturing and service elements to the economy. The interconnected economic branches of agribusiness, hospitality and tourism have long been recognised as core areas through which countries, regions and destinations can generate competitive advantage (Meler & Cerovic, 2003). Internationally food and food tourism appear to be thriving and have excellent growth prospects (Henderson, 2009); food has become a major element of tourism strategy and is now accepted as a primary motivator in destination choice and a satisfier of both physiological needs and related tourist desires for sense of place and authenticity (Tikkanen, 2007, Sims, 2009). In 2009 tourist expenditure on food and drink amounted to almost €2 billion, representing the largest single component of individual visitor expenditure (Fáilte Ireland, 2010). In Ireland, food production, distribution, marketing and food tourism are the combined remit of a number of government policy makers; individually, these organisations acknowledge the importance of direct food supply chains as a means to improving product quality, customer satisfaction and competitiveness. They also acknowledge that such direct relationships are increasingly important to national and regional economies, creating employment and playing an integral role in positioning of Ireland as a Food Island (Bord Bia, 2008b). Two key agencies are responsible for the developing strategy in relation to food and food tourism, namely Bord Bia, the Irish state food agency and Fáilte Ireland, the national tourism development authority. In its document "*Anticipating Tomorrow: Shaping the future of Irish food and drink market towards 2020"* Bord Bia (2008a) outlines a vision that builds on Ireland's positive image as a food producer by emphasising the local, the ethical, the natural and nutritious as key elements in the development of a dining out culture. Fáilte Ireland (2010) recognises food as playing an ever increasing role in national tourism strategy by identifying local food as a key driver for consumers in both choice of destination and the purchase of food services within destinations. In developing a National Food Tourism Implementation Framework, Fáilte Ireland (2010) proposes a strategy for food tourism based upon the twin aims of promoting a local food culture and expanding the number/variety of authentic high quality food experiences in key destinations across the country. In addition to the public sector policy makers there are also interest groups, producers and practitioners (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2) who advocate the view that there is a requirement for the promotion and development of more sustainable approaches to food supply chains by adapting our food production, sourcing, quality and standards to realise the potential competitive and economic benefits for food, tourism and hospitality industries (Henderson, 2009).

This paper builds upon a 2009 study which explored the extent to which hospitality organisations in the Southeast of Ireland engage in direct supply chain relationships to procure local food. The research sought to explore the espoused benefits of '*farm to fork'* relationships and identify the perceived challenges in forming and maintaining these direct food supply chain relationships. A key finding that emerged from that study was the need for a more holistic approach to the development of direct supply chain relationships that

takes cognisance of the views and requirements of all the stakeholders in this area (O'Donovan, Quinlan & Barry, 2012). In light of this finding it is appropriate to engage with stakeholder groups so as to identify potential initiatives aimed at fostering an integrated approach to developing and supporting sustainable direct supply chain food tourism collaborations. By bringing together key hospitality stakeholders; such as restaurateurs, hoteliers, chefs, tourism and hospitality interest groups, with key food producing stakeholders; such as specialist growers, artisan producers and food interest groups it is hoped through open dialogue, a climate of collaboration will be fostered which will underline the inter-dependency of these groups and bring to light some recommendations for more integrated future activity. This paper presents the findings of an in-depth consultation process with a wide sample of stakeholder groups in an effort to assess the state of existing collaborations and propose a framework of tangible recommendations to enhance direct supply chain collaborations in food and food tourism. It is envisaged that this research will act as a reference point for policy makers to guide, support, facilitate and assist hospitality industry and food producers to collaborate and form sustainable strategic relationships to support the development of Ireland as a destination for food by enhancing its food tourism product.

Overview of Research

This research is inspired by the findings of the O'Donovan, Quinlan & Barry (2012) study and seeks to develop upon the analysis, which was exploratory in nature. This research takes an interpretive philosophical stance as it aims to explore and describe incidences from a qualitative viewpoint (Crossan, 2003). An inductive approach is utilised which involves moving from specific observations to broader generalisation. The use of an inductive approach allows a good '*fit*' between the social reality of the research participants and ensures any emergent findings are '*grounded*' in that reality (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). The purpose of the present study is to further probe sectoral supply chain relationships (SCR) activity in an Irish context and ascertain how direct SCR can be fostered, supported and exploited to develop Ireland's food tourism product. The objectives of the study are;

i. To explore the mutual benefits of direct chain supply chain collaborations among food, tourism and hospitality stakeholders.
ii. To assess the nature and perceived impact of barriers and challenges faced by stakeholders when engaging in direct supply chain collaborations.
iii. To identify and appraise existing initiatives aimed at fostering collaborations to support the development of food tourism.
iv. To propose a framework of tangible recommendations and initiatives aimed at fostering and supporting collaborations to enhance food tourism in an Irish context.

In terms of the research objectives articulated and the exploratory nature of the phenomenon under investigation, a qualitative data collection method is deemed the appropriate means to support the objectives of this study. The over-arching rationale of the focus group technique for the present study as articulated by McCracken (1988) is its capability to reveal aspects and perspectives that might not emerge or be as assessable without group interaction. The nature and structure of focus groups is illustrated by

Herndon (2001) who identifies focus groups as delivering a structured qualitative approach for eliciting unstructured discussion; this approach also affords researchers a first-hand opportunity to observe and document opinion sharing and explore the perspective comparisons of participants (Morgan, 1986; Morgan and Spanish, 1984). In this context the focus group approach is identified as the best qualitative method to capture the descriptive, interactive and discursive dimensions thus providing a rich set of qualitative data from a set of respondents drawn from diverse backgrounds who possess a depth knowledge and experience. The Focus group method is also advocated by who Morgan (1997) posits that traditionally the focus group method is used in an exploratory role where the research study calls for a data collection method that enables meaningful discussion of the subject matter and encourages respondents to voice their opinions and perspectives of the phenomenon under discussion. In this context a focus group can be applied as a research tool for gathering information on a topic of interest from small groups of individuals who share common characteristics or interests (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The data collected through focus groups is primarily qualitative, the emphasis is placed on discussion as "*participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they listen to what the others have to say*" Patton (2002, p. 386). Focus groups encourage discussion, determine attitudes and behaviours, and simulate ideas among the participants (Agan, Koch and Rumrill, 2008; Zeller, 1993). It is for these reasons that a focus group methodology is chosen as it is best suited to provide rich, descriptive information from respondent's viewpoint (Fern, 2001; Fonatana and Frey, 1994). Applying a methodological approach provides an atmosphere that facilitates discussion of the topic of interest; additionally, it is an excellent way for researchers to examine underlying logic and as such can be used for the purposes of both theory development and theory confirmation in relation to food tourism.

Overview of Research Methodology

The research process utilised sought to adhere to established protocols from a series of academic publications on focus groups (Kruger and Casey, 2000; Stewart *et al*, 2007; Bloor *et al*, 2001; Morgan, 1998). The first step in focus group design is to clearly articulate the purpose of the research, which in this instance is guided by the research objectives. The second step is to determine from whom information is to be sought and in this case three decisions are made to identify the sampling frame, namely, the number of each type of focus group to host, the type of participant to recruit and the desired number of participants in each group. A decision was made to host two parallel focus groups; one to solicit the opinions & perspectives of industry practitioners, the other to involve key informants from a range of industry representative bodies and public sector stakeholders to food, tourism and hospitality sectors. Industry practitioners were not recruited randomly, but rather were chosen to include an adequate spread of participant characteristics, across different categories of producers and different types of hospitality operations, so as to have an optimal spread of ideas and enable creative discussion. The food practitioner groups represented at the focus group are identified in figure 1.1 below

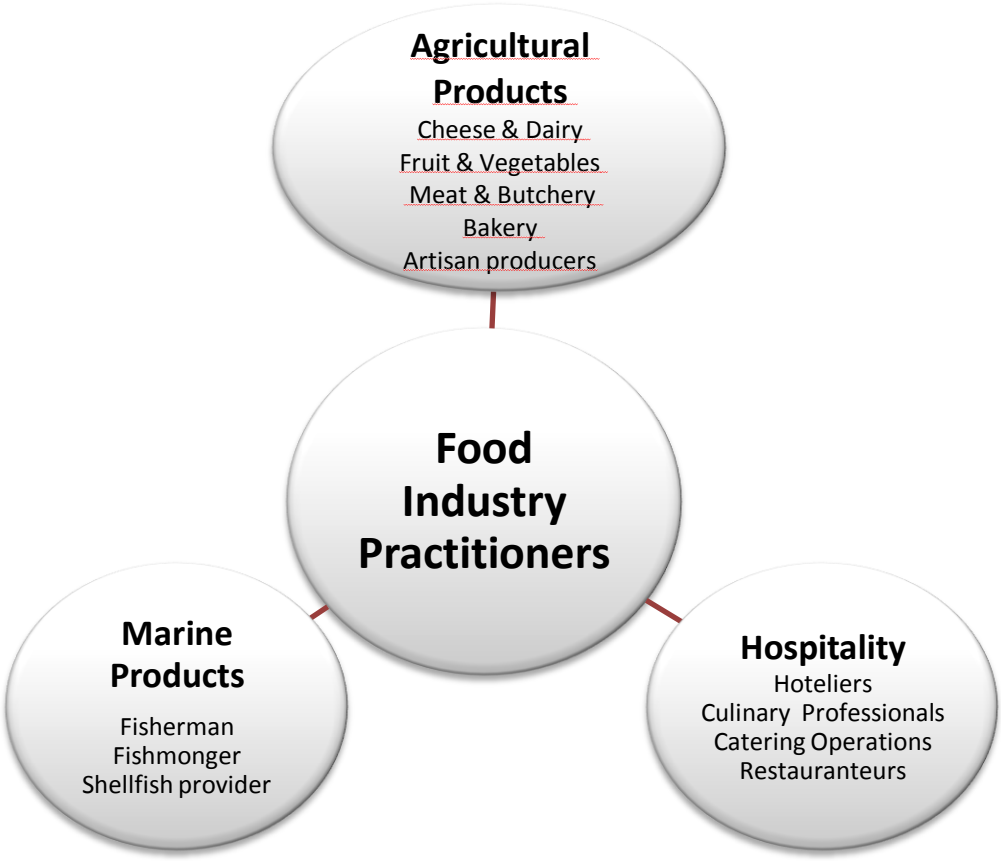

Figure 1.1 Food Industry members represented in Practitioner Focus Group

The stakeholder group comprised of a wide variety of sectoral representatives and public sector organisations that either develop or seek to influence policy in the areas of hospitality, food and food tourism. The participants were purposefully chosen to allow for a breadth of expertise and knowledge of the topic under discussion. The number of focus group members was limited to between 15 – 20 participants as Fern (2001) indicates that groups larger than this number tend to focus on shared rather than unique information. The stakeholder groups represented at the focus group are identified in figure 1.2 overleaf

Figure 1.2 Food stakeholder groups represented in Practitioner Focus Group

The third step in focus group design involves devising an approach to questions and structure in order to stimulate participants into discussion; this is achieved by generating questions that are actionable; questions that contribute directly to achieving the research objectives. In this context all questions are guided by the research objectives which are translated into four core discussion themes, namely an assessment of the benefits and challenges of engaging in direct supply chain collaborations, an identification and appraisal existing initiatives aimed at fostering collaborations to support food tourism; and the diagnosis of framework of tangible recommendations and initiatives aimed at fostering and supporting collaborations to enhance food tourism in an Irish context. Each theme was considered in a sequential manner by both industry practitioner and food stakeholder focus groups.

The final step is the planning and execution of the focus group session. For the stakeholder representative session (n=15) a U- Shaped layout was utilised to encourage free and open exchange of ideas (Krueger and Casey, 2000). For the practitioners' session (n=18) the room was broken down into three separate blocks facilitating six participants at each block, thus the groups worked collectively to consider topics under discussion in greater detail, this allowed for shared consideration of divergent perspectives. Moderation was provided by a member of the research team who sought to encourage and involve all participants in

expressing views constructively whilst not encountering bias or manipulation. Each focus group session began with an overview of the study; a rationale for the focus group methodology and an outline of the sequencing of discussion topics was also detailed to the participants. Time management is viewed as critically important in the mediation of focus group discussion (Stewart et al, 2007), as a consequence both sessions were scheduled to last 90 minutes with each of the four discussion themes being allocated equal time. The contributions and discussions of the focus group members were recorded through detailed note-taking and observation by two members of the research team. Summarised accounts of the opinions and perspectives articulated by focus group members were reported back to the participants at the end of each session and amended as necessary to ensure that they accurately and fully represented the participants' points of view.

The effectiveness of any research methodology is evaluated to a large extent on the degree to which findings are deemed to be both reliable and valid. According to Bryman and Bell (2007:163), reliability "*refers to the consistency of a measure of a concept*". Validity is concerned with the integrity of the findings; "*whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about*" (Saunders et al., 2003:57). In this study the focus group format and questions were pre-tested with a small group of industry and academic informants who concurred that the measures reflected the concepts to be evaluated. It is also asserted that compliance to well-established design considerations, the development of a detailed protocol and implementation of triangulated data recording methods reduce possible threats to reliability.

Research Findings

An analysis of the respondent's demographic characteristics from both groups confirms that the participants are drawn from a set of key stakeholders representing a broad range of local, regional and national bodies, and in the case of hospitality practitioners/food producers' encompass a wide variety of types and sizes of operations. A majority of respondents hold positions at executive level within their organisations and were drawn from a diverse array of organisations and representative bodies.

Benefits to Direct Supply Chain Collaborations for Hospitality Providers, Food Producers & Stakeholders: The first question each focus group sought to address was to identify the benefits that stakeholder's hospitality practitioners and food producers perceive as arising from engaging in direct supply collaborations. All participants in both groups stated that they receive tangible benefits from direct supply collaborations and a range of benefits were articulated; the benefits are classified by the researchers into a number of categories based on their main area of impact including financial, service, product, sustainability, relationship and traceability benefits. The focus group members re-affirmed all benefits espoused in the 2009 study of hospitality practitioners, however given the larger and more disparate sample of respondents additional benefits were identified under each of the categories which are marked with an asterisk in Table 1.1

Perceived Benefits arising from direct supply collaborations		Perceived challenges associated with the formation of direct supply collaborations
Financial Perceived increase in Value for money and price		**Financial** Concerns regarding… Economic environment* Value for money Credit Facilities Payment Terms*
Service Improved … Delivery Reliability Responsiveness Level of Service Availability of products Consistency Flexibility Food Experience*		**Operational** Challenges with… Ordering Delivery Consistency Contact Stock Control Concern about … Levels of customer focus Wastage Availability of products Number of Suppliers
Product Improved … Freshness Quality Variety Standards Seasonality Authenticity*		**Product** **Perceived limitations with …** Variety Product sophistication* Quality & Standards
Sustainability Better Purchasing Policy Greater utilisation of Local produce Ethical and social responsibility*		**Sustainability** Trust Communicating Provenance*
Relationships Improved Communication & Trust Better Information Supply		**Relationships** Perceived as Time-consuming Issues pertaining to… unity among stakeholders* Developing Trust Cooperation vs. Competition*
Traceability Improved Product Knowledge		**Traceability** Hard to establish exact supply route Variance in Detail of Information provided*
Regional Destination Image & Brand Building* Creating Authenticity *'Sense of Place'**		**Regulatory** Breadth of Regulation* Associated Cost of Compliance*
Strategic Improved perception of Irish Food* Building Consumer Awareness* Promotion of Food Culture*		**Consumer** Need for improved communication to consumers* Keeping pace with changing trends*

Table 1.1 Perceived Benefits and Challenges of Direct Supply Chain Collaboration

The primary consensus among the hospitality practitioners and food producers is that the main benefits arising from direct supply collaborations can be attributed to product and service benefits. In relation to food products, the core benefits cited were freshness, quality and seasonality. In relation to service benefits the core benefits espoused were consistency of produce and flexibility of delivery. The dual aspects of sustainability and traceability also came to the fore in the conversation, particularly in the context of food production; the group recognised the growing market importance of local and seasonal products and the use of traceability as a unique selling point. The main difference among the group was in relation to levels of cognisance of the financial benefits of supply chain collaborations, while it was evident that both hospitality practitioners and food producers acknowledged the financial rewards that could be accrued and that *added value* was being received through direct supply collaborations, it was evident that many of the practitioners expressed issues in relation to economies of scale and an absence of the opportunity to bulk buy at a discounted cost.

The stakeholder focus group acknowledged many of the benefits that had been stated by the practitioners/producers; however it was evident that this group considered the benefits in a more nuanced form, by identifying and illustrating a number of further benefits of direct collaborations and espousing benefits that could be classified as more strategic in nature; the group highlighted elements such as authenticity, experience, destination and regional branding, added value in terms of customer perceptions, ethical and social responsibility, building customer awareness. The group spent a considerable amount of time discussing customer and tourism based outcomes such as the impact of direct supply chain collaborations in food as a means to generate positive images and create a sense of place experience through authenticity. There was also consensus among the group that more and better direct supply chain collaborations enhanced the branding of destinations which could contribute added value through favourable perceptions of the exploiting the connection between food and place. Direct supply chains in food were also viewed as a means to generate social and ethical awareness on a local and regional levels thus feeding in to the idea of Ireland as *Green Island*.

Challenges to Direct Supply Chain Collaborations for Hospitality Providers, Food Producers & Stakeholders: The perceived challenges associated with the formation of direct supply collaborations was the second topic under consideration by each focus group. The findings were classified into seven categories representing the main areas of impact including financial, operational, product, sustainability, relationship, regulatory and consumer issues. As with the preceding discussion regarding the benefits of direct supply chain collaborations, respondents confirmed and added to the findings of the 2009 study with regard to the challenges faced by those engaging in direct supply collaborations, however the wider membership of the current focus group study also enabled the researchers to explore in more detail the exact nature and extent of the challenges identified by hospitality practitioners, food producers and stakeholders.

The major challenge facing both groups is the prevailing economic climate; all parties expressed the view that the market was both depressed and fickle; however majority of practitioners and producers expressed concern with regard to the financial challenges associated with direct supply collaborations between smaller organisations, in particular issues such as costs, credit facilities and terms of payment. Operational challenges concerned purchasing, ordering, integration of processes and procedures were also re-iterated as posing organisational challenges for both sides of direct supply collaborations. Additional obstacles discussed by practitioners/producers during the focus group included issues such as traceability, product sophistication and quality control. All participants voiced concerns regarding traceability and there was broad agreement with regard to a perceived lack of refinement of products for the *trade*. Food producers acknowledged that in some cases that there had been quality and refinement issues, however in the majority of circumstances such issues have been resolved through better communication between suppliers and purchasers and that it is only flawed *perceptions* that now remain, which may need to altered to reflect the changed reality. Challenges pertaining to traceability, information provision and quality assurance procedures observed during this production process were discussed, participants pointed to the a wide array of regulatory barriers as being one most persistent challenges when engaging in direct supply chain collaborations. The breadth and quantity of regulations were identified as being very cumbersome to navigate, whereas the requirements and associated costs of compliance were deemed prohibitive and overly restrictive in nature.

The stakeholder focus group affirmed much of what been stated by the practitioners/producers; however it was evident that this group considered the challenges at a macro level by highlighting sectoral issues including lack of unity between food stakeholders and challenges in moving toward co-operation rather than competition so as to develop regional *food culture*. The group expressed that one of the greatest challenges faced when developing direct collaborations is requirement for a more unified approach between suppliers and practitioners; for the most part supply chain activities in the hospitality sector were perceived as being more transactional than relational, and that efforts should be focused toward communicating the value of direct collaborations at both strategic and operational levels. Stakeholders also espoused a need for more co-operative rather than traditional competitive approaches in the establishment of direct collaborations, in particular participants suggested that a lack of co-operation was evident in relation to sharing knowledge, skills, developing links and entering to new markets.

A need to better communicate the concept of *added value* of sustainable local food to consumers was seen as being of growing importance, as was the need to build awareness of food origins. The stakeholders articulated a growing need to better communicate provenance of food in response to the emergence of a more discerning and sophisticated consumer. There was full agreement among the stakeholder group that Ireland has a nascent food culture and while there are some great initiatives, a requirement exists for a more supportive and collaborative approach to highlighting provenance, developing consumer awareness of the benefits of direct food supply. The increasingly discerning and trend-driven consumer was viewed as a potential challenge by some stakeholders, giving rise to a

growing requirement for ongoing research into the changing nature of tastes and customer trends both at home and abroad.

Analysis of Existing Initiatives for Direct Supply Chain Collaborations: Each focus group was asked to identify existing initiatives that acted as support mechanisms to further the development of direct supply chain collaborations. The hospitality providers and food producers were initially reticent, requiring clarification of the exact nature of what could be defined as a direct supply chain initiative, once clarified that responses could include any external assistance that either promoted or supported the formation of closer collaborations, the respondents identified a number of programs. The programmes and initiatives identified were broadly categorised based on their primary focus of activity and are listed in figure 1.3 below;

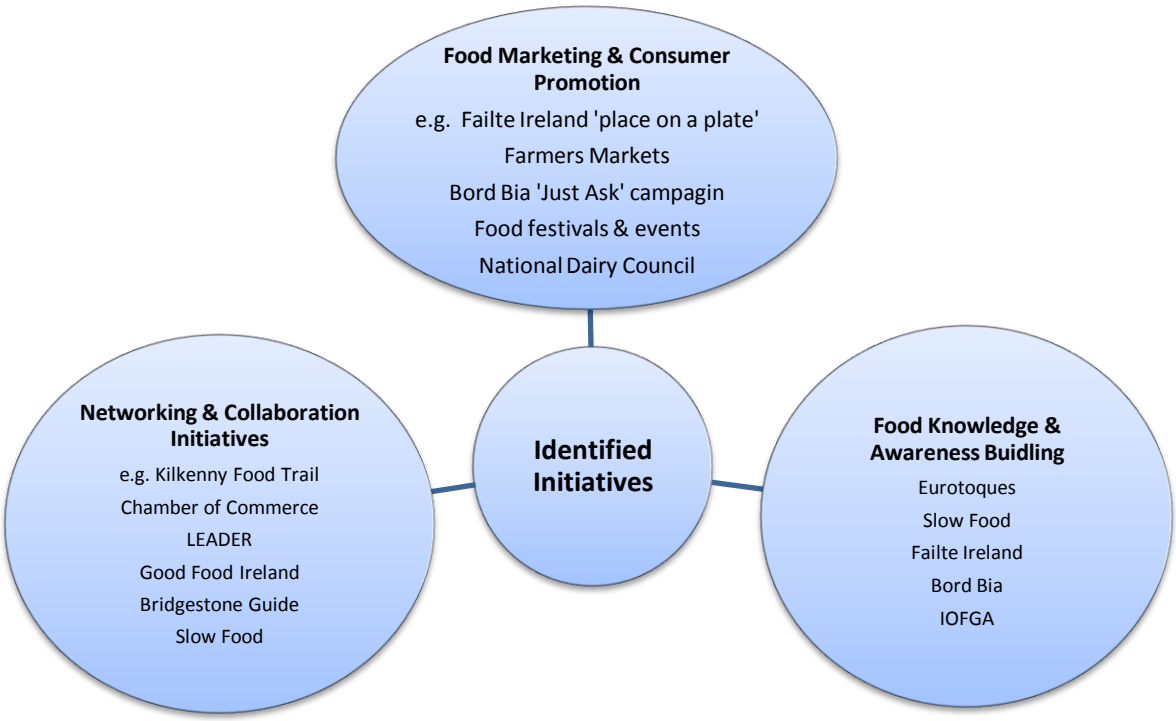

Figure 1.3 Initiatives identified as supporting Direct Food Supply Chain Collaborations

When asked to discuss the influence and relevance of these initiatives the consensus among the group was that while many are successful and all were welcomed, there is a requirement for a more integrated approach on the part of stakeholders, particularly on a regional level as there seems to be a duplication of resources, tasks and effort in some quarters. The stakeholder grouping clearly understood what constituted direct supply chain initiatives; however, there was no significant difference in the list of programs provided. In discussion

it became apparent that while there is support for all initiatives, there is evidence of duplication of activities to support relationships and little or no resource-sharing or collaborative activity between stakeholder groups at both regional and national levels.

Suggested Initiatives to Support Direct Supply Chain Collaborations: Participants in both groups were asked to highlight some initiatives could be applied to promote and support direct food supply chains the Irish hospitality industry. The practitioner focus group and food stakeholders provided a significant number of targeted suggestions which are summarised in Table 1.2 below

Potential Initiatives	Practitioners Suggestions	Stakeholder Suggestions
Food Marketing /Promotion	Promotion of indigenous produce More integrated website content	Use of a personality based promotion Food Heroes : initiatives to put a face to the producers and practitioners of best practice Educating consumers in relation to the value and contribution of direct food SCR
Networking / Collaboration Initiatives	Database as an interface between producers and practitioners Structures to support more producer collaboration in food distribution	More support for existing and greater effort in establishing new networks Creating regional food hubs & food-producer events Co-operatives for marketing and distribution channels
Knowledge /Awareness Building	Direct SCR tool kit Protection of Indigenous products Knowledge Development: short sessions & longer educational programmes	Educate producers as to the value of marketing and understanding distribution channels Promote added organisational & consumer value of direct SCM More inclusion of sustainable food in education curricula at all levels

Table 1.2 Suggested Initiatives to support Direct Supply Chain Collaborations

Of the many suggestions proffered to promote better direct collaborations; one innovative suggestion was to develop a database that could act as an interface between suppliers and practitioners to facilitate in the development of networks on a national or a regional basis. Another was the development of a website that could be used to raise awareness of local food, it was indicated that such a website should be open access to consumers, producers and practitioners. Participants acknowledged that similar databases and websites were already in existence through state agencies, therefore there should be no need for further duplication. The group suggested that a more integrated repository was required, however this would require a greater commitment by public sector agencies and special interest groups to share knowledge and resources to create a definitive website that would cover all aspects of food product knowledge, consumer focused food promotion and address operational challenges such as access to regulation and legislative requirements. In order to overcome the frequently encountered challenge of a limited distribution network for artisan products, practitioners suggested a structured and co-ordinated approach to food product distribution, thereby enabling suppliers to reach a wider marketplace and hospitality providers access a wider range of products.

The participants expressed a desire for a more integrated educational strategy by policy makers and interest groups to promote and develop awareness, particularly in food product knowledge and sustainability, in education curricula at all levels. The development of a direct supply chain *tool kit*, supply chain collaboration management information sessions and workshops on coping with legislative frameworks were also identified as possible remedies to existing knowledge gaps. The protection and promotion of indigenous produce was suggested as an initiative that could be developed at relatively little cost, this initiative would serve dual purposes acting as a promotional tool for producers and a unique selling point for practitioners. Participants indicated that one body should be charged with the promotion and development of direct SCR, however all parties were in agreement that fees could not be charged for supports in the current economic climate.

Stakeholders acknowledged while there are a number of successful support initiatives, from a sectoral standpoint there is a requirement for a more integrated approach on a national, regional and local basis, one that is based on affiliation and co operation. One of the clear recommendations from the stakeholders is the requirement for greater commitment to the development of food networks as support systems for both producers and practitioners. The group agreed that existing food networks act as conduits between producers and industry; however the development of regional networks could act as platforms to create hubs/ co-operatives that could help producers to develop collaborative marketing and distribution channels. Networks could also be used to disseminate information, establish trade fairs and promote regional food. The focus group identified that promotion of supply chain collaborations should be considered on a national basis through the use of a personality or the personal based promotion and initiatives to "*put a face to the producers and practitioners of best practice*". The group recognised that there is a requirement for a change/modification in the perception of consumers in relation to the value and contribution of collaborations from the environmental (green), health, economic and societal perspectives. The stakeholders also identified education as one of the key

initiatives that will influence collaborations in the future, suggesting that education should be utilised to promote indigenous food through formal and informal processes; from hospitality, tourism and culinary education, to the development of network based initiatives to educate producers as to the value of direct supply chain collaborations.

Discussion & Recommendations: The findings of the primary research strongly confirm the acknowledged operational and strategic benefits to food and hospitality organisations of forming direct supply collaborations, but furthermore the findings additionally corroborate the benefits for destinations and regions in terms of positive social, economic and tourism outcomes. It was clearly articulated that closer linkages between local food producers and hospitality providers was central to generating positive destination images, at both national and regional levels, so as to build authentic tourism experiences through a strong connection between food and place.

The focus group discussion though broadly positive in its perception of direct supply collaborations, did uncover some challenges faced by food producers and hospitality providers in seeking to form closer supply collaborations. Some of these challenges were operational and mirrored the inevitable trade-off that must be made between bulk buying from large wholesaler organisations with favourable credit facilities and large variety of internationally-sourced products to sourcing locally from smaller producers, with seasonal limitations and smaller distribution capabilities. These trade-offs are to be expected and all practitioners agreed that they could be effectively overcome through improved sectoral communication of the many benefits of direct supply collaborations. A notable and perhaps more critical challenge for many of the practitioners was an articulated difficulty in forming direct supply relationships. This challenge ranged from difficulties in becoming aware of potential supply chain partners, overcoming regulatory barriers and structuring direct supply relationships once the initial contact had been made. Part of this perceived challenge in forming and fostering direct supply chain collaborations was a perceived imbalance between the distribution capabilities of local producers and the distribution expectations of hospitality organisations. A key concern of practitioners was the challenge of establishing provenance and branding local food. All participants saw this as critical to the building of a strong regional food culture yet many practitioners felt ill-equipped in formally designating and branding indigenous products. Communicating with consumers the benefits of local, sustainable and seasonal food was another issue with which many practitioners had had difficulty and although many such initiatives do exist at a national level, many practitioners felt that a more integrated approach was required to educate and build consumer awareness of the importance of supporting direct supply collaborations.

The discussion of initiatives to foster direct supply chain collaborations was based on a strong desire by both practitioner and stakeholder groups to overcome perceived barriers to direct supply collaborations so that the benefits of these relationships could be reaped by all. From the research presented it is evident that there is a requirement for a more proactive and strategic approach to support direct food supply chain relationships in Ireland; what is essential is a collaborative approach between the agribusiness, hospitality and tourism sectors so that competitive advantage can be attained equally by all parties. Such an

approach calls for both national and regional initiatives that embrace connectivity and creativity between stakeholders, producers and practitioners, however for these initiatives to have optimal impact a clear framework to direct, support and integrate such initiatives must be put in place. There are four elements required as a basis to support direct supply chain relationship initiatives, namely, policy, promotion, awareness and network building.

There is a requirement for clear unambiguous national policy in the area of direct supply chain collaborations. This policy must not only highlight the competitive and economic value of such activity but additionally communicate the social, environmental and sustainable contribution such relationships endow on regions and communities. While it is acknowledged that food production, food supply, food promotion, food regulation and food tourism are the remit of a number of state orgasniations and are the concern of a myriad of representative bodies and special interest groups, it is only with unified policy development and stronger inter-organisational integration can greater collaboration between stakeholders, producers and practitioners be fostered and supported

Building awareness of food product knowledge and sustainability is an additional means by which to develop and support direct collaborations. Such promotion and awareness building will have to be incorporated at all stages of education, from primary to forth level and would additionally require professional development opportunities for those engaged in food activities through subject specific courses, information sessions and workshops that deal with the complexities of direct supply chain collaborations.

A consumer-directed campaign of promotion in relation to the value and contribution of direct supply chain collaborations from an environmental, health, economic and societal perspective should be considered on a national/international basis through the use of personality-based promotions that put a face to the food producers and hospitality providers that exhibit best practice in direct supply relationships.

A clear outcome of the research discussions was the finding that fostering direct supply relationships can only be delivered through the creation of strong regional networks that facilitate interactions and collaboration between food producers and hospitality providers. Such networks will allow for the aforementioned initiatives to be delivered to practitioners and enable members to collaborate in addressing challenges, creating regional food hubs, designing food-producer events and perhaps potentially establishing co-operatives for wider marketing and distribution of local food products.

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