

Focus on Food Forum – Summary of Key Opportunities

Background

The forum held in Geelong in July 2014 brought together a diverse range of interests around the theme of food, including participants from the agri-business, non-profit, education and government sectors.

The session was a starting point for conversations about engagement between cross-sector interests. This report provides some recommendations for next steps or activities that could realistically be pursued within limited funding constraints.

Key themes

The full list of business and social themes and potential response to each are included as Appendices. Key issues common to many participants included:

- Increasing the application of technology in farming
- Helping smaller businesses capture brand value to compete against larger companies
- Negative perceptions of farming as a vocation
- Backing new opportunities such as food and tourism, indigenous foods, aquaculture and urban farming
- Challenging economic conditions
- Creating job opportunities for youth and retrenched worker segments
- Resource efficiency and waste management
- Access and affordability of healthy food, general health and nutrition
- Enabling for- and not-for-profit partnering

Recommendations for next steps

A focus on SME development is a logical primary goal. Taking into account resource limitations, the potential role that GRLEN can play includes:

- Locating skills gaps (or existing analysis) for local agribusiness
- Linking young people involved in food relief with agri-business pathways
- Helping to convey new information about new market opportunities, networks and coops to SMEs
- Identifying supply chain constraints in agri-business that are due to social factors (eg. seasonal worker productivity)
- Identifying or engaging with larger companies that proactively invest in supply chain development
- Helping GWYL develop partnering strategies
- Identifying and promoting existing success stories in the areas of:
 - Business and NFP partnering
 - How NFPs provide value to the business sector
 - Younger generations and farming
- Increasing the level of problem definition around skills gaps and the education agenda
- Dialogue with major waste management players about careers and skills needs
- Enabling a collective impact response to broad based and urgent social issues (such as mental health of retrenched workers)

Perhaps the best way forward is to establish a self-selecting local leadership / steering group to pursue this agenda.

It should also be noted that these recommendations are made in good faith and often with limited background information. Proper investigation is advised before acting upon them.

Appendix A - Focus on Food Forum – Business Issue Themes

Theme	Potential opportunity / response
AGRI-BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT	
Tourism and agri-business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New product development for agri-business aided by tourism sector collaboration / coordination • Stronger local communities • Local sourcing • SMEs to collaborate in assisting cluster development
Emerging product categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous foods • Urban farming • Hydroponics • Aquaculture
Indigenous food market challenges: sources, quantity, harvest, awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot a project specific response before attempting to scale
Imitation products capturing brand equity in offshore markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and help trial technology to combat brand imitation • What extra skills development is required, or implementation barriers removed? • Can we engage research organisations or government (Trade, IP Australia)?
Developing export markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better information about new market and product opportunities (especially Asia) • Cooperative models
High land prices a barrier to agri-business development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carbon farming as an alternative product • What is impact of land affordability on community infrastructure, workforce and wellbeing and what is that costing business?
Attracting skilled workers to regional areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map key skills gaps, which ones are most significant and what it is costing • Identify and promote success stories to targeted skilled workers • Social procurement? • What supporting social infrastructure is required?
Limited technology capability and integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective training for incumbent farmers; is there a new market opportunity for a for-profit or social enterprise model to fill this need? • Are the necessary education pathways being supported?
ECONOMIC / STRUCTURAL	
Local manufacturing decline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there natural strengths or regional proximities that can improve the business case for advanced / specialised manufacturing? • Higher value / niche / boutique product and market development • Better information about new market opportunities, networks and coops • Large pool of workers available for semi-skilled work
Economic backdrop challenging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase collaboration between education, training and business • Increase the understanding of the benefits of strategies that indirectly support the business objective, such as supply chain constraints from social factors • What type of project structures (a mix of shared value and collective impact initiatives for example) would provide the most significant

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	economic gains for the region?
B2B strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help smaller businesses become supplies to large food buyers (Coles, Woollies etc) • Tap into larger companies that take supply chain development seriously
Helping SMEs compete against global players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist technology investment • Differentiation features, such as social benefits (labour, diversity, nutrition, land intensity, carbon intensity etc)
Limited partnering with NFPs / social enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and promote success stories, clearly outlining the business benefit • Use GWYL as a case study (\$5m t/o) for developing the partnering business case • Equip with tools and collaborative forums for developing strategies involving NFPs • Identify opportunities in disadvantaged worker labour hire • Partner with RTOs • Establish data (if not already done) on NFP players and value add to business sector in the food / agri-business area
Costs of product branding / marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMEs to collaborate in assisting cluster development
LABOUR MARKET	
Workforce skills / qualifications for entry level jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better problem definition around balancing skills development and accreditation needs [also refer Symantec and cyber security] • Harness youth IT literacy • Find a specific area in agri-business for trialling rapid youth up-skilling and / or re-training of retrenched workers • Recognise and promote NFP / charity / social enterprise as a pathway for business careers • How and where does business lead this discussion, drawing in government, NFPs and agencies as required? • Is there a pathway into growth area of waste management?
Seasonal worker supply and productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater support services for seasonal workers such as backpackers
RESOURCES / WASTE	
Inefficient use-by date systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the barriers to improvement? • Can we engage NFP interests in problem examination?
Excess food stock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase value / reduce disposal costs through hub distribution, animal feed or composting (for- or not-for-profit) • New distribution models, such as social enterprise driven to “enable” value add • Create a conversation around benefits to locally based businesses of improving community health and nutrition

Appendix B - Focus on Food Forum – Social Issue Themes

Theme	Potential opportunity / response
FOOD / POVERTY / HEALTH	
Food relief: demand, resources, distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond grant / philanthropic funding • Food market hub
Customer issues: appropriateness, nutrition, affordability, access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase beneficial indigenous food, native plants, fresh / local uptake – awareness starts at primary school(?) • Probe deeper into reasons for low nutrition choices and form a response
Community health: nutrition levels, knowledge about balanced diet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the understanding of the business and social benefits of coordinated and collaborative strategies • Consider a collective impact response
Not challenging disadvantage / accepting status quo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactively telling positive business engagement stories to right audience in the right language • Equipping NFPs to help engage business in change
Transport cost for reclaimed food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can business support transportation and / or planning logistics
NFP HEADWINDS	
Lack of common agenda and vision amongst actors; competitive environment for non-competitive issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective impact approach • Self-selecting stakeholder group
Working with for-profit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost savings from waste utilisation • Locate examples of success, analyse, showcase and capacity build
Success as NFP reduces funding channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase business partnerships • Social enterprise model? • Encourage social procurement implementation by government and large business
Constraints due to structural complexity (DGR/TCCI status, FRRR status to support social enterprise)	
EMPLOYMENT / YOUTH / SKILLS	
Local employment growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify best areas for skills application / development with business needs
Labour market entry points for youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on strengths (IT user literate) • Rapid skilling for food / agri-business • NFP / Social enterprise as career or pathway • Complete skill building, such as confidence / life skills
Opportunities for manufacturing workers / hardship / mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify food / agri skills matches or rapid development opportunities • Potential for social enterprise employment?
Brain drain – best talent leaving the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education agenda that includes technology, business skills etc in agribusiness • Skills development and map out other pathways into agribusiness
Young people turned off agribusiness due to perceptions (media exacerbates) and low awareness of new approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness, knowledge and success stories of young people in agribusiness • Cooperative structures • Make link between young people on the ground involved in food relief and agribusiness skills / pathways

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Farmer skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to equip older generation with IT and other skills to improve farm performance?
Indigenous community development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Business support• Help facilitate relationships with companies that have RAPs• Links to niche markets• Tourism opportunity
ECONOMIC	
Financial barriers to agribusiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cooperative / collective models for scale• Impact investing for capital• Seek support from large buyers
Commercial returns for farmers for industry viability / combatting multi-nationals and supermarket power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategies for increasing margins, such as market power, brand equity building, distribution models, technology enablers
Leadership skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership capacity building; who are local champions and how can we encourage them to tell their story• Develop an action learning program for emerging leaders
Helping smaller / start-up innovators to flourish	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify who they are and what their needs are?• Tap into similar groups / forums in Melbourne
De-scaling larger business	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supporting spin-offs from for-profits to enable greater focus, innovation and job opportunities• Support the creation of boutique assets / brands
Cheap imports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Logistics advantage? Backfill empty transportation with food exports
Balancing urban growth with productive land	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help increase returns (to owner and locality) from highly productive land by boosting eco-tourism value / boutique brands• Link to overseas buyers / tourists• Cluster support (eg. technology, logistics, freight, distribution, regional branding, market hubs)