

Science Cafe evaluation report

University of Warsaw Botanic Garden,
Poland

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Introduction

University of Warsaw Botanic Garden is a department of the Faculty of Biology. It is one of the oldest and the smallest institutions of its kind in Poland, and is firmly established in the heart of the capital. It combines plant conservation, research and education in a vigorously developing institution with a 200-year history.

Our Garden, as part of the Big Picnic community has offered number of events and meetings concerning the food sovereignty. The goal of the last phase of the project was organizing series of science cafes, based on the experience gained during the first two years of the project. Thanks to the co-creation approach and engagement of different partners and audiences we had an opportunity to prepare the wide range of topics for the science cafes that hopefully met expectations of the audiences.

One part of our work during the project was engaging our own Garden crew – from different garden departments – through the regular meetings (once a month) for "the Garden Breakfasts", where we could share the knowledge and interests. One of them was dedicated for the co-creation session with the garden workers (mostly gardeners). We asked for help with inventing topics and places that would be the most interesting as the themes and locations for the future science cafes. Hence there were many good propositions we could not realize all of them, but we chose few of them from the winning ones. We cross-checked the ideas for the subjects with our experiences from other co-creation sessions with our different partners and evaluation and interviews with audiences we gathered along the events. The one most desired and chosen by our gardeners and curators seemed

to be about the price of the food and what drives for its composition, why bio-certified food is so expensive etc. The other was also controversy for GMO. There were many propositions for hosting-places for the science cafes – mostly open, public, out-door, well-known and easily-accessible locations. Local markets were among the favorites, as well as local community centers, libraries etc.; our Garden was also often mentioned. Finally, we decided to chose 3 main topics for science cafes and repeat them in different locations, including our garden. We thought it would allowed us to target diverse audiences. Here we are describing series of cafes about food costs and GMO. We decided for the general formula of short talks/presentations held by two experts representing different points of view, followed by the discussion engaging the audience.



Figure 1: Poster advertising our science cafes. Graphic design: Zuzanna Wolejko. We distributed them in the city public spaces.

1st case study: Science Cafe „What is the real cost of our food?”

Through the project we often encountered doubts, concerns and questions about the prices of food, as well as about the certification and trust for the food origin. It is important here to underline the specific polish context, where society is still not very wealthy, most of the people remember previous system together with fresh food from the family gardens and social distrust is common feature. That all influence consumers attitude towards food market, prices, quality of food and its verifiability, food fashions and certification of ecological production. Being aware of all of these concerns we decided we want to simply discuss about the factors influencing pricing system and quality of food.

It was important to invite a farmer who is directly responsible for food production and can easily explain the system mechanisms from his own, practical perspective. Hence we asked Monika Kuryluk for being our first expert, as she is certified ecological farmer running her own family farm and in the same time involved in educational campaigns about sustainable food production. We knew her from our previous cooperation with the partners, for example from excellent explanation skills at the Food Sovereignty Forum „Nyeleni”.

For the second expert we needed somebody who is able to explain the food system mechanisms from more general, consumer and food chain perspective. For the first science cafe we chose Nina Bąk – one of the founder of Food Cooperative „Dobrze” (our partner in the Big Picnic project) and active member of food sovereignty networks, promoting alternative supply chains. For the second science cafe we invited Magda Jarocka – an expert on global relations in food context, also actively involved in promoting alternative supply chains, mostly the Community Supported Agriculture. We knew her as a good speaker as she was giving a talk during the Warsaw Culinary Festival we organized last year.

Finally, we decided to chose local markets for our locations, as the best places for lively discussion about food prices.

1. First location: Bio-food Market

The first science cafe about the food costs were hosted by the Bio-food Market called BioBazar. They were very happy to invite us to their place for the Saturday noon, when the market is open and support with some food, drinks and advertisement. The BioBazar is local company already well-

known in Warsaw for organizing this eco-food market during weekends for many years, although still accessible only for narrow group of people from middle class interested in healthy food. This year it moved from the city center to the further, business district, so we hoped we might reach slightly different audience from our usual one – middle class, health-keen businessmen/women, but not obviously aware of the environmental costs of our food production.



Figure 2: Nina Bąk talk during the science cafe at BioBazar. Photo credits: Magdalena Siemaszko

Unfortunately our hopes were not fulfilled at all, as we had only 4/5 guests for our meeting, and all were our friends apart from one who was selling his own food at the market. The rest came because of us or because they were working at the BioBazar this time and they were mostly members of Food Cooperative “Dobrze” or our common friends. We had nice, interesting discussion within our own environment and with the seller, but we cannot say we reached any new audiences or step out of our comfort zone. We felt it was a failure and we tried to understand why.

Firstly, we analyzed the material conditions as place and timing and it occurred that we could decide for better time, when the market is really busy, but we followed the suggestions of our host – the BioBazar manager. The room where we met was very difficult to reach, at the true backstage of the market, small and hidden by the toilets. It was well-prepared, comfortable, with screen and nice food, but nobody could reach it, despite the posters. Moreover, weather was beautiful, very hot and sunny, so we assume people prefer to spend time outside, not in our ‘meeting room’. Finally, the new location of the Market itself is not attractive and above all it adjoins to the business buildings empty during the weekend and big shopping mall; there are no community houses around.

We were also reflecting on the target group we wanted to address by this event and we realized that doing this during their leisure and consumption time might not be the most adequate approach. Moreover, people who can afford to buy food at the BioBazar are probably not the most interested in the prices and costs of food. Therefore we were happy we decided to organize second science cafe at completely different market location.



Figure 3: Monika Kuryluk talk during the science cafe at the BioBazar. Photo credits: Magdalena Siemaszko

2. Second location: local conventional market

To meet our goals of reaching the audiences that are not our usual guests and who might be truly interested in the price of food we moved our science cafe to the other part of the city and the river, to the Southern Prague housing district, which is much more diverse than the central part of Warsaw, where our Garden is located. It is also a place, when one of the most famous, old food market Bazar Szembeka is located and still functioning. Even though it was just rebuild and gained the new market hall, it has still specific, lively atmosphere and you can still meet there farmers coming with self-grown products. Prices are several times lower than in such big markets in the central district.

This time it was important for us to offer good accessibility and stay at the open space, as weather was still beautiful, as close as possible to the sellers, consumers and everyday life of the market. For organizing the science cafe we cooperated with the management of the market hall, who lend us sound system and other equipment. At the begging I was not sure if we are really welcomed or rather troublesome (I assume they are not really used to cooperate with public institutions, rather only commercial), but during the event they were very helpful, supportive and at the end we felt as this cooperation was something important for them.



Figure 4:

Food and drink both made of one of the market stalls. We bought fruits from the neighbouring sellers. Photo credits: Magdalena Siemaszko

This time we decided to have no presentations and strict plan (2 talks followed by questions), but rather more open formula, ready for constant discussion and responding to questions. Definitely it was a good idea, as audience was also much more informal, ‘fluid’ and came not really for the specific meeting, but rather on the occasion, along the shopping to stop for a while to listen and talk. Because of this fluidity it is difficult to asses precise number of people, who attended the Cafe, but it was around 10 (who stayed for the whole meeting) to 30 (who participated in part of it). In the pictures you can easily see how audience was changing and how we were trying to adjust to this (figures 5,6 and 7). Fortunately our experts were prepared for such situation and managed the spontaneous situation.



Figure 5: We

started on the one side of prepared place. Photo credits: Magdalena Siemaszko

Our audience was really diverse, the large proportion of them consisted of older people, but there were also family with children and some younger participants. Most of them were eager to share their own experience, concerns and reflections, and they preferred to talk or rise questions than just listen.

At the same time it was sometimes difficult to talk and follow one thread, when people were asking very different questions and commented by sharing they different fears.



Figure 6: But

because of the conditions (long distance and due to not bother the sellers) we quickly moved to the other side of the place. It was definitely more convenient for people. Photo credits: Magdalena Siemaszko

People often spoke about the trust for the sellers and farmers, how we can know if our food is healthy and fresh etc. We asked them what do they focus on while doing shopping for food and most of them respond that price is important, but at the same time the direct contact with the seller/farmer. Some of them mentioned that they mostly do shopping on this market exactly because they know sellers, they know who sells good potatoes and who has fresh, own fruits. They appreciate possibility of tasting the food and ask questions to the seller, the impression of ‘freshness’ of the food at the market seems to be also crucial. However, one young man noticed that now it might be very often only the impression, as more and more sellers at the market are not farmers any more, but they buy commercial food from the stock market, so that is much more tricky. Older people shared they yearning for the old times, while all the sellers at the market were real farmers. Although they also noticed these real farmers are still existing here and when you are permanent guest and you talk to the people it gets very easy to discern who is growing his own food.

There were also some comments concerning the importance of healthy food and some kind of transparent information, for example about the quality of processed food and glycemic index. One woman asked if she can trust the eggs from the village (directly from the farmer) that they are

healthy, because they are not tested as these from the farm. The other concerns were about chemicals and condition of pollinators.



Figure 7: One of our gardeners, who participated in co-creation session for choosing the places and topics for the science cafes and lives nearby, came to the meeting and actively participated.

3. Third location – University of Warsaw Botanic Garden during *European Days of Action for Good Food & Good Farming* (future)

We are planning the big event in our Garden for 27 of October which is the date of the European days of action for good food and good farming. Program will be different from previous science cafe and much more extended. It will consist of 2 different panels focused on the Common European Agricultural Policy and environmental impact of food production. Hence we will have more experts from different disciplines.

First part will be dedicated to the Common Agricultural Policy for European Union. (What CAP is and how does it create our food system?) Dr Katarzyna Bańkowska from Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development from Polish Academy of Sciences will explain the idea, tools and actual status of CAP.

For the second part we plan the discussion on environment conservation and farming system in European Union (inter alia neonicotinoids and GMO policy) involving scientist from our Garden Marcin Zych, Dorota Metera – an expert on bio-food certification and science journalist Marcin Rotkiewicz.

2nd case study: What is this GMO?

The debate on GMO in Poland is still very vibrant and it causes a lot of controversies. There is lot of misapprehension of the perspectives both among consumers and scientists. Hence we decided to meet two scientists from completely different fields and let them deal with the audience. One expert was a geneticist from the Faculty of Biology and second anthropologist from the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology researching food practices and system, consumption, mostly in Mexico. The aim was to show that GMO debate, especially in farming, and the arguments around might concern very different problems, solutions and mechanisms, related to the technical, biological, conservation issues as well as the social conditions and political systems.



Figure 8:

Science cafe in local community center in Józefów. Photo credits: Agnieszka Rogalska-Jung

1. Community center in the small town at Warsaw border (Józefów)

First science cafe was organized in the cooperation with the local community center in the small town at Warsaw border, practically serving as Warsaw, rather wealthy, suburbs. As the weather was beautiful and infrastructure of the community center good enough the meeting was outside. Around up to 20 people showed up and the audience was quite diverse, but not very specific. They were engaged and asked some specific questions.



Figure 9: photo credits: Agnieszka Rogalska-Jung

2. Center for Intergenerational Activities “Nowolipie” in the Muranów district

The audience in CAM (Center for Intergenerational Activities) was very big (almost 60 people) and diverse. The majority of the audience was elderly people from neighborhood who are coming for cheap meals in CAM and around 10 young people, who came specially for this event. People stayed in the place after the dinner. Many of them were very curious, topic seems to be important and interesting, even before the talks some of them asked if the cookies that were on the tables are GMO.



Figure 10: Center for Intergenerational Activities. Photo credits: Krystyna Jędrzejewska-Szmek

The place was arranged that way that there was some distance between speakers and the audience it was due to the technical problems with amplifiers – they were needed as the audience was big and some of the people had hearing difficulties. We would prefer to have it arranged differently. Both people coming for the event and the personnel of CAM wanted us to organize other meetings at their place.

We anticipated the presence of elderly rather poor people so we talked to the researchers that they should use the language understandable for such an audience. Finally it proved to be quite difficult

for the speakers to talk the way which is comprehensible for the majority of the audience and interesting for the rest.

Most of the questions and comments from the audience concerned patents on seeds and farmers dependence on big corporations, monocultures, industrial farming – perspectives and fears, chemicals (for example glifosato), local sovereignty and conditions for small-scale farming.



Figure 11: Photo credits: Krystyna Jędrzejewska-Szmek

The biggest audience we had in CAM, they have had contact with people coming to them and these people are keen to take part in various events. They seek for contact with other people. Nevertheless for some of them the meeting was too long and the message too complicated. They felt honoured by meeting “real scientists” at their place.

One of the researchers with whom we worked during cafes did not have almost any prior experience with non-formal education. The lesson taken from this science cafe proved to be useful during science cafe in Botanic Garden. Speakers changed their presentations and were much more attentive to the language they use.



Figure 12: Photo credits: Krystyna Jędrzejewska-Szmek

3. Botanic Garden within the Science Festival

The third, last ‘round’ of the GMO science cafes was held in our Garden. It was declared as a part of the Science Festival – annual event organized in autumn by scientific institutions for promotion of science and education. It is popular among Warsaw citizens, open for everybody and well-advertised. It allows institutions such as University to open the doors and offer hundreds of lectures, workshops, debates, open labs and trips from various disciplines. We thought the debate on GMO perfectly fits to such conditions.



Figure 13: Photo credits: Magdalena Siemaszko

Unfortunately, once again we failed with numbers of our public – we have exactly 3 guests. However, there were very interested and great discussion emerged thanks to such intimate atmosphere. All of the guest were very curious and asked many questions, often related to the political context of GMO and food production in Poland, European law etc. They shared their own comments and concerns.

Finally, one Sunday later where some people came to the Garden asking for the GMO Science Cafe we realized the failure of the Science Festival organizers, who made a date mistake in all official program materials. Unfortunately we were not prepared for immediate pop-up science cafe, but at least we know our assumptions about the interest in such topic as GMO debate among the festival public were not completely mistaken.