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Benchmark Report : Les Jardins de Cocagne vs. International Initiatives



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Executive Summary

This report provides a comparative analysis between Les Jardins de Cocagne, a French national network of organic market gardens with a dual mission of sustainable agriculture and social reintegration, and four international initiatives: Growing

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Communities (UK), The Stop Community Food Centre (Canada), Soil for Life (South Africa), and WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

The research highlights similarities and differences across five dimensions: mission, activities, governance, funding, and impact. The findings show that Cocagne is particularly strong in linking organic farming with professional insertion programs, whereas international counterparts illustrate complementary approaches:

- consumer-based urban food systems (Growing Communities),
- community empowerment and food justice (The Stop),
- low-cost ecological practices for vulnerable groups (Soil for Life),
- global volunteer exchange and cultural immersion (WWOOF).

The main recommendations for Cocagne are to diversify revenue sources, strengthen urban initiatives, and expand volunteer engagement, while maintaining its distinctive focus on professional reintegration.

Introduction

Access to healthy food and sustainable agricultural practices has become a global priority. Across the world, initiatives are experimenting with new models to address both environmental challenges and social inequalities.

France's Les Jardins de Cocagne represents one of the most ambitious models: it combines organic agriculture with reintegration pathways for unemployed individuals. Its dual mission is both ecological and social. The present benchmark situates Cocagne within a broader international landscape, in order to:

1. Compare it with other organisations working on similar objectives.
2. Identify best practices that could strengthen its financial and organisational resilience.



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3. Offer recommendations for its future development.

By analysing four initiatives located in Europe, North America, Africa, and the global network of WWOOF, the study highlights concrete lessons that Cocagne can adapt to the French context.

Methodology

The benchmark relies on desk research and a review of multiple sources:

- **Official websites** of the organisations.
- **Academic literature** on community-supported agriculture (CSA), food justice, and ecological farming.
- **NGO reports** and case studies.
- Sample student reports on non-profit benchmarking.

The organisations were selected based on three criteria:

- Similar mission (organic farming, food justice, social insertion).
- Geographical diversity (to illustrate global approaches).
- Availability of data (funding, governance, impact).

The analysis compares the organisations according to five axes:



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- Mission and objectives.
- Activities and programs.
- Governance and organisational model.
- Funding structures.
- Social and ecological impact.

Organisation Profiles

1. Les Jardins de Cocagne (France)

- **Mission:** Reintegration of people excluded from the labour market through organic farming.
- **Activities:**
 - Production of organic fruits and vegetables.
 - Weekly distribution of “paniers bio” (vegetable boxes).
 - Job training programs in horticulture and logistics.
 - Collaboration with social services and municipalities.
- **Funding:** Combination of public subsidies, sale of produce, and partnerships with local authorities.
- **Strengths:**
 - Strong national network with more than 100 gardens.



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- o Certified organic farming.
- o Recognised social impact on employment.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - o Dependence on public subsidies (over 50% of revenue in many gardens).
 - o Fragility of local branches when subsidies are delayed or reduced.

2. Growing Communities (UK)

- **Mission:** Build a sustainable urban food system through community-led action.
- **Activities:**
 - o Veg-box scheme reaching over 1000 households.
 - o Farmers' market connecting local producers with consumers.
 - o Urban market gardens producing vegetables within London.
 - o Apprenticeship schemes in urban farming.



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- **Funding:** Mainly from veg-bag sales and market fees; minimal reliance on subsidies.
- **Strengths:**
 - Strong financial sustainability.
 - Urban proximity to consumers.
 - Consumer loyalty and visibility in London.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - Limited scalability due to land constraints.
 - Requires continuous consumer engagement.

3. The Stop Community Food Centre (Canada)

- **Mission:** Empower communities and ensure access to healthy food.
- **Activities:**
 - Food bank services.



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- o Community kitchens and collective meals.
- o Urban gardens and greenhouse projects.
- o Workshops on nutrition, cooking, and food justice.
- **Funding:** Combination of government grants, philanthropic donations, and community fundraising events.
- **Strengths:**
 - o Comprehensive approach that addresses both food access and empowerment.
 - o Strong impact in low-income urban neighbourhoods.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - o Complex organisational structure requiring high management capacity.
 - o Strong dependence on donations and volunteers.

4. Soil for Life (South Africa)

- **Mission:** Promote food security and ecological resilience by training low-income communities.



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- **Activities:**
 - Workshops on composting, permaculture, and water conservation.
 - Support for household gardens.
 - Community empowerment and health promotion.
- **Funding:** Philanthropic donations, small training fees, local partnerships.
- **Strengths:**
 - Low-cost methods are easily adaptable to poor environments.
 - High empowerment of women and vulnerable groups.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - Limited scalability beyond the Cape Town region.
 - Dependency on external donors.



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5. WWOOF (Worldwide)

- **Mission:** Promote cultural exchange and sustainable farming through volunteerism.
- **Activities:**
 - Connecting volunteers ("WWOOFers") with host farms.
 - Work-exchange model: volunteers receive accommodation and food in exchange for work.
- **Funding:** Membership fees from volunteers and hosts.
- **Strengths:**
 - Global reach across more than 100 countries.
 - Strong network of motivated volunteers.
 - Promotes organic farming culture internationally.
- **Weaknesses:**
 - Uneven quality of host experiences.
 - Limited focus on professional reintegration.



Comparative Analysis

1. Mission

- Cocagne is unique in combining agriculture with professional insertion.
- Growing Communities emphasises urban sustainability.
- The Stop integrates food aid with empowerment.
- Soil for Life focuses on food security in poor communities.
- WWOOF promotes cultural exchange and global learning.

2. Governance and Funding

- Cocagne: mixed funding, high subsidies.
- Growing Communities: self-financed through sales (over 80%).
- The Stop: dependent on complex fundraising.
- Soil for Life: donor-dependent, small-scale.
- WWOOF: global membership model, relatively autonomous.



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3. Social and Ecological Impact

- Cocagne: measurable reintegration outcomes (employment, skills).
- Growing Communities: sustainable food supply chains, consumer awareness.
- The Stop: strong social inclusion in urban settings.
- Soil for Life: household empowerment, ecological resilience.
- WWOOF: cultural immersion, ecological awareness worldwide.

Comparison Table

Organisation	Mission	Strengths	Weaknesses
Les Jardins de Cocagne (FR)	Organic farming + job reintegration	National network, certified organic, strong social impact	Dependence on subsidies, local fragility
Growing Communities (UK)	Sustainable urban food system	Urban reach, financial sustainability, consumer loyalty	Limited scalability
The Stop (Canada)	Food justice & empowerment	Integrated services, high social inclusion	Complex operations, reliance on donations
Soil for Life (SA)	Empower low-income groups to grow food	Low-cost, adaptable, empowering	Local scale, donor dependency
WWOOF (Global)	Cultural exchange via farming	Global network, volunteer base, ecological promotion	Uneven quality, host-dependent

Conclusions & Recommendations



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Les Jardins de Cocagne has successfully combined organic farming with professional insertion. However, to remain resilient and innovative, it could learn from international examples:

1. Diversify funding models

- o Increase reliance on consumer sales schemes (inspired by Growing Communities).
- o Develop social enterprises (e.g., training workshops, eco-services).

2. Develop urban presence

- o Pilot urban micro-gardens or rooftop farming projects to reach new audiences.

3. Expand volunteer engagement

- o Set up a Cocagne-Volunteers program inspired by WWOOF to engage youth and international participants.

4. Integrate community services

- o Inspired by The Stop, offer workshops on nutrition, health, and food justice in addition to baskets.

5. Promote low-cost ecological methods

- o Share composting, permaculture, and water-saving techniques à la Soil for Life to reduce costs and environmental footprint.



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By balancing financial autonomy, community engagement, and ecological innovation, Cocagne can strengthen its role as a European leader in sustainable and socially inclusive agriculture.

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