

Growing and Cooking

Mathieu Vicente

Institut Polytechnique LaSalle Beauvais

Project supervised by Monsieur Philippe Caron
Director of sustainable development of LaSalle Beauvais

Introduction

I am a student of Agriculture in LaSalle Beauvais and my specification is in organic production. The project “Growing and Cooking” is based on organic farming. The implementation of an organic garden requires some specific knowledge. To translate them for people who are in the lower social economic bracket I was chosen by LaSalle Beauvais to set up this project.

The project was set up by the organization Draaf (Direction Regionale de l’Alimentation de l’Agriculture et de la Foret) and developed by LaSalle Beauvais and the city of Beauvais. It was an experimental project on a local level with the aim of expanding to a national level. Some objectives went further than just growing some vegetables.

The central question of my internship is: how to set up a vegetable garden and cooking classes with people in the lower social economic bracket?

To answer this, it is necessary to be interested in the project such as it was anticipated during the preliminary study on paper and then also in its practical realization.

The project

The project was set up by the organization Draaf (Direction Regionale de l’Alimentation de l’Agriculture et de la Foret) in collaboration with ARS (the Regional health board), l’IREPS (Instance Regionale de l’Education et de Promotion de la Sante), LaSalle Beauvais and the cities of Beauvais and Amiens. These organizations decided to create and experiment in 2013 a project with some people who are in the lower social economic bracket. This project was named “Cuisine et Potager Nourricier”.

The dertermining factors

In Picardie, the nutritional habits and health situation of the people is disturbing. In 2008, a document “nutritional habits in Picardie” drawn up by DRASS studied and examined some surveys of the nutritional health programme (PNNS) on the Picardian people. It was shown that just one quarter of people follow the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of dairy products. The consumption of fruit and vegetables was also far below the recommended amounts (only 7.4% of the population ate at least five fruits and vegetables...) (THOMAS et al., 2008). This is due to a lack of economical means but also to a lack of knowledge.

In the aim to reverse this trend, Beauvais city provided 1200 families with 250m² gardens for 150 euros per year. However, today the demand has become far superior to the amount of available plots, and therefore waiting lists are considerable. This demonstrates a strong interest among people to look after their own primary nutritional needs for economic reasons and also as a hobby. In these family gardens, we find a lack of knowledge leading to widespread and irresponsible use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. We must therefore offer the plots along with the appropriate corresponding information and expertise.

Lastly, the number of people helped by the European food aid programme has decreased in 2014, even though there has been an increase in the number of families in need. This situation calls for a new way of providing food aid in France, which is what my pilot project aimed to achieve.

The project 'Growing and cooking' responds on a local level both to the need to increase the consumption of vegetables among the beneficiaries of food aid, as well as to face the diminishment of European food aid in 2014 by combining social, economic and agricultural needs with sustainable growing, culinary and environmental practices.

Project aims

The particularity of combining growing and cooking activities is that it impacts the participant on different levels. These are:

- It stimulates collaboration between socially diverse people by providing them with a common goal. This then is also a means of social integration for people who are excluded or rejected from society.
- A dynamic partnership between the families, participating organisations and the food banks, showing us that a garden can be a source of exchange and sharing within the community.
- Creates awareness regarding the importance of using fresh produce originating from a sustainable, biological production source. Promotes awareness of its health implications and the benefits of a balanced diet. It reinstates knowledge of traditional recipes and culinary practices that respect seasonal and local availability.
- This project benefits both body and mind. It provides a source of physical activity, boosts self-esteem and reduces the isolation experienced by some families.

The experience of Rodolphe Grosléziat seen through his book « *Le potager anti-crise* », (translated as The anti-crisis vegetable garden)

In his book « *Le potager anti-crise* », Rodolphe Grosléziat demonstrates that the vegetable garden is a local solution for the future from both an ecological and economic viewpoint.

- Gardening as an ecological solution: The fact is that if we want eat good healthy food, we must produce it using ecologically friendly practices which also have a good impact on the environment.

- Gardening as an economic solution: it is a productive space which permits us to grow a wide variety of vegetables, a diversity which in turn fulfils the nutritional needs of the body. A well maintained vegetable patch can save a family thousands of euros each year. If we compare this to the minimum social welfare allowance in France (RSA) which is 450 euro per month, this corresponds to six months of payments.

Gardening means we are responsible for a long-term project with difficulties which we must overcome by acquiring information and then applying it in the garden. Gardening is also a form of expression and increases self-esteem. In fact these people gain some self-sufficiency as they take their needs into their own hands, which is not the case if we simply wait for government aid by using food banks.

It is to follow these objectives that the project 'growing and cooking' was set up. During four months we focused all our efforts towards accomplishing these aims.

Analysis

There are different stages which must be considered in this project. Firstly, the project was the object of a preliminary study. The project being completely new, a written plan was made, but was then subject to certain readjustments in its practical realisation on the land. Upon completion of the project, an evaluation and improvements for future projects of this sort were established.

The project on paper

The preliminary study was conducted by Mrs. Agnès Pozo from the Beauvais city. This pre-analysis permitted us to make a rough draft, to create an idea of the project and to identify various problem areas.

The selected families are directed and followed by the CCAS.

The DRAAF and especially the regional health board wished to conduct an experiment on 30 people, 15 of which were from Beauvais city, and the remaining 15 from the surrounding areas.

Each person participating in the project is involved in the development of the vegetable garden through activities overseen by a professional gardener. People wishing to have fresh vegetables accepted to come and produce them and learn to use them in the kitchen.

Concerning the vegetable growing, a piece of land of 2000m² (situated in an Eco space) was made available for the project. Each person committed themselves to participate in the gardening activities. The surplus of production was given to the food bank, thus promoting a feeling of sharing, solidarity and consumers taking an active part in producing their food. Gardening sessions were held once or twice a week, each session lasting two hours.

Concerning the kitchen activities, the aim was to prepare meals with vegetables originating from the garden. The recipes used were chosen to increase the participant's knowledge of cooking. For example, the theme of the classes could consist of cooking with fresh produce,

nourishing oneself with a small budget or cooking with leftovers. The cookery classes took place once a month with a duration of three to four hours.

An intern from the Institut of LaSalle, a fifth year student in health and nutrition coordinated the project. This internship was offered by the DRAAF.

An expert gardener, Mr. Rodolphe Grosliéziat, ensured, in collaboration with the monitoring gardener, the technical and organisational aspects of the vegetable garden.

The project in reality

I was employed by LaSalle Beauvais to set up and manage the project. My range of activities was quite large, from finding the families who would participate in its creation and the evaluation of the vegetable garden. Therefore in this section I have chosen to explain the different stages in the implementation of the project 'growing and cooking'

Here are the stages which I followed:

- Fixing the objectives
- General organisation of the vegetable garden
- The project in practise

The objectives

Firstly, the social objective must be considered. This consists of permitting people from a lower social economic background, who do not have access to land, to cultivate as team a plot of land in collaboration with a gardener. This action participates in the valorisation of the individual through work (social reintegration of that person), to the acquisition of knowledge, to an idea of sharing and exchange through discussions and work activities. Indeed the inactivity faced by people in this uncertain workless situation is often difficult to support since they are no longer in a normal work rhythm. Also, work is a means of socialisation. The inactivity can thus lead to a lack of structure and aims, and lowers self-esteem, which is essential in the search for work and a reintegration into professional and social activities.

Another important objective is enabling people to regain a healthy lifestyle. Gardening offers much physical activity which is necessary for health and mental well-being. A healthy diet devoid of chemicals also participates to the person's health. Moreover, learning sustainable agricultural practices and good cooking techniques leads to a **diverse diet** as well as **economical benefits**. The goal of this project is to show people the link between the earth, the products (harvest) and its transformation into a meal. In this way people are provided with the tools for a healthy lifestyle based on respect for both man and the environment.

Lastly I would like to demonstrate a personal goal. Already having experience in managing a biological vegetable patch (both as a hobby and on a professional level) I wanted to ensure a good production level. It was important for me that each family would benefit from an abundance of vegetables.

General organization

The project began in the end of April, finished in the end of October and was then evaluated. Participation in the project is free and voluntary. The participants were vaccinated against tetanus. I arrived on the project in June, which was very late for the season leading to a short

preparation period and a need for fast organization to ensure the project's success. Indeed, the time of year and the weather have an impact on the vegetable cycle which is important to consider if we want harvest vegetables. Therefore the delay in the development of the garden was compensated by hard work and efficient management. Specific tools were provided and actions were established so as not to forget any elements necessary for the efficient development of the garden.

The implementation of the project

Means and tools used:

The first tool was the **Action Plan** drawn up to prioritize work. This fixed a virtual directional line for a fluid progression of the project and to keep the targets in sight. Here below is the action plan which was followed.

- Recruitment of families
- Developing the garden
 - Preparing the earth (compost and straw)
 - Searching for plants
 - Building some structures
 - Putting in place an irrigation system
- Monitoring and maintenance of vegetable garden
- Project evaluation (failures and success)

Then, we created a **Planning** so the families could have a general overview of the project. Thus, we could show the planned activities and give the participating families the responsibility to organise their own agendas. This document was distributed to the organisers and to the families so everyone could organise their own time. A site map and the available public transport were mentioned in this document.

A **Logbook** was established and completed every day by the monitoring gardener. This tool was essential in the project management in order to follow the planned activities and permit the evaluation. In fact, this tool clearly demonstrated the failures and success which are an important consideration for improving the project next year.

A **Billboard** was placed near the gardener's office to allow the families to exchange information and stimulate them to participate in the activities offered. It served to promote the project by means of photos and a summary explaining its aims. So, it was a link between the families as well as outside the project with the people who stopped opposite this billboard with inquiries and questions. Sometimes the families themselves explained their project to these curious people which was a great way of creating awareness of the existence of such a project. This word of mouth communication attracted new participants.

A **Contact List** was drawn up listing the details of each family including the date of arrival, food bank membership and contact information. The contact information of the bank food was also listed.

Actions:

My late arrival meant that several different tasks had to be carried out simultaneously. The goal was to begin the project very fast to catch up for the delay and still be in time for the natural cycle of the vegetables as well as achieve the aims which were fixed. To do this we made a calendar of activities showing a logical order between tasks which needed to be done.

We began by researching families who visited the food banks, an action which was carried out with urgency. To do this we made a list of the food banks, contacted the managers and then went to meet them. Proceeding in this way to speak with the family was more efficient than sending a letter. We also put up some posters in these food banks to inform people of our project and give them the opportunity to participate. Nevertheless, not much attention was paid to these posters so an involvement of the food bank managers was required to explain the project. Four social organizations were contacted: two food banks, one homeless shelter and a reintegration programme. The table below shows the number of families recruited by these social organizations.

Table 1: Number of families recruited by the social organisations

| Social Organisations | Number of families when the project started | Number of families during the project |
|----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Epicerie du coeur | 8 | 2 |
| Emmaüs | 6 | 4 |
| ABEJ coquerel | 2 | 1 |
| Chantier d'insertion | 1 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 17 | 8 |

In this table we can see that the amount of families who initially participated in the project decreased after just one or two sessions. This difficulty to create interest within the families made us generate a new strategy to involve them. In fact, my first idea was to have two activities a week. Instead of this I made myself available to help develop the garden and give advice every day of the week so the people could come whenever it suited them best.

Figure 1: When the garden started



The initial preparation of the earth was done by Beauvais city. To do this, the city took some advice from the expert gardener Rodolphe Grosleziat. A plot of 2000m² was cultivated for 20 families, an estimation of size in relation to the number of families made before the project began. In April a farmer ploughed the land with a tractor to a depth of 15-20 centimetres. A

second preparation was carried out by the horses of the city and a harrow to finalize the work. Also some tools, organic seeds and plants were bought by the city to begin the project. This came to a cost of 800 euros which was spent before my arrival. This sum represented an important amount especially since we would have been able to find these plants and seeds from alternative, local and cheaper sources, for example, from gardeners and schools. Due to this large initial spending we had just 400 euros left for the rest the project.

Half way through June I contacted a school (Les Fontainettes college) to collect some more vegetable plants. These were free since they could not be sold by the school business. We collected 300 tomatoes plants, 30 cucumbers and many aromatic herbs. In addition to this I contacted my school to borrow an irrigation system the use of which is recommended during the summer. After this, we began the growing activities. The previous winter had been both very cold and long causing a delay of 1 month in the natural vegetation cycle. Consequently and conveniently, this compensated for our delay in starting the project. For example, the courgettes began to grow only on the 10/06/2013, which is very late. We kept some of the seedlings in the poly tunnel in preparation for the arrival of better weather conditions.

To conclude, the harvest meant that the families work had come to an end. This harvest was used for personal consumption by the families in the group. There was no conflict during the sharing procedures because the production was enough to account for everybody's needs and wants. When we had a surplus of vegetables, we gave them to the food bank. Finally, the kitchen classes were provided to use the vegetables from the garden in a healthy nutritional way. Some information was also given by a student in "nutritional and health" who elaborated a booklet on the properties of different vegetables. The name of this booklet is: "what we need to know about our fruits and vegetables". This document was made available to the families.

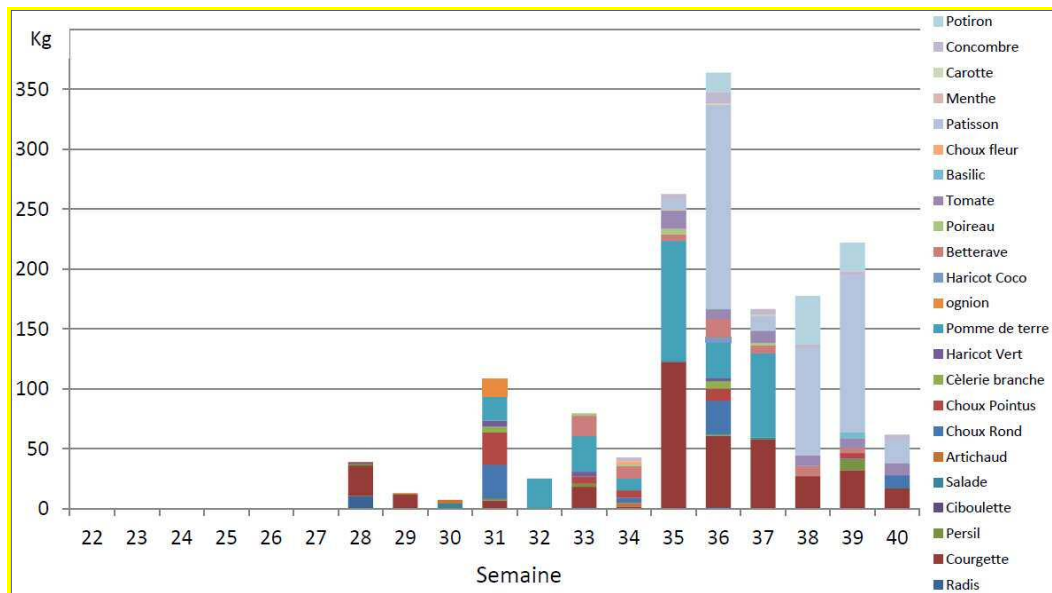
Project's results

The project's results, drawn up the gardener, were based both on vegetable production levels and on the families' involvement.

Production evaluation

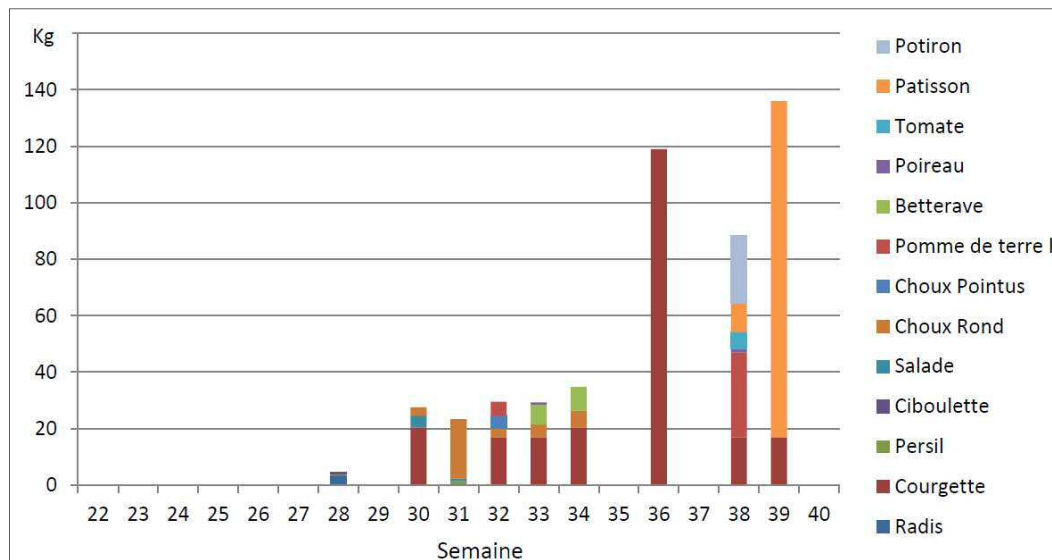
The harvest started in the beginning of July and continued exponentially until the end of the project. The most important level of production was in September when the harvest of the cucurbitaceous family began (courgette, pumpkin, cucumber and squash). The pictures below show the categories of vegetables and corresponding quantities.

Figure 2: The categories of vegetables and corresponding quantities



Moreover, the quantities of vegetables produced permitted us to supply two foods banks in Beauvais town. However we gave more regularly to one food bank for reasons of proximity and size. We made deliveries to this food bank every week. We once also supplied another food bank when we had a large surplus of vegetables. Shown on the picture below is the distribution of vegetables to the first food bank.

Figure 3: Distribution of vegetables to the first food bank

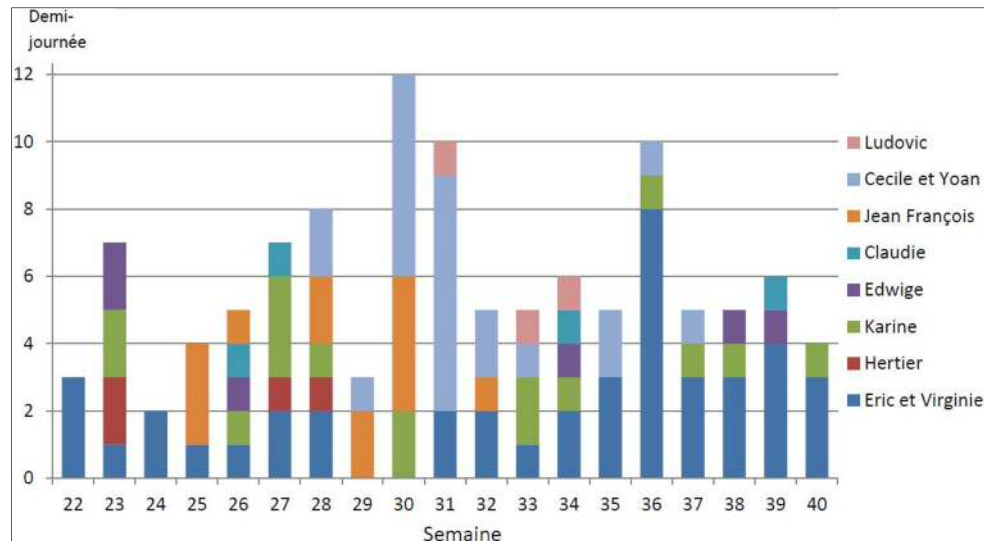


This picture shows the deliveries getting larger in correlation with the garden's increasing production. After three months we reached a very high production level which was enjoyed by the gardeners (participating families) and others benefiting from the food bank. We fulfilled the objectives which were to produce vegetables in both quantity and quality.

Evaluation of the participant's involvement

The social objective of the project was the family's involvement. Without an evaluation of this we could not measure the project's success. The picture below shows the presence and involvement of the families.

Figure 4: Presence and involvement of the families



However the involvement was less than hoped when the project began. In fact, just eight families participated and only three came every week since the beginning. The other families showed irregular participation.

There are several reasons to explain this lack of involvement:

- difficulty of the work
- weather conditions
- fragile health of some
- lack of motivation (difficulty to take to a work rhythm)
- going on holiday during the summer
- return to work
- personal problems

Moreover, it was difficult for the families to have a long term view on the garden because for some gardening was a first time experience. Production is not immediate and the families could not see the fruits of their labour. This explains the lack of motivation. However, we noted more involvement when the vegetable production began. Habits of people changed as they would come to the garden and harvest healthy products instead of always going to the supermarket. For example, sometimes a family would come especially to harvest vegetables and aromatic herbs to prepare the daily meal. This self-service idea created motivation among people to invest more time in the garden. People harvested their vegetables with consideration for the other participants, meaning each person always had enough of all vegetables. The practice of gardening permits one to take their life into their own hands, and not only receive food from the food banks. These self-grown vegetables took on a different

value since the people had themselves invested time in their production, and therefore treated them with respect.

However, human labour remained an unstable resource since it was on a voluntary basis.

In relation to this problem it is important to conserve a positive state of mind because the projects primary function was its social aspects. For this reason I put in place a social structure to maintain cheerfulness.

Strategies put in place by the gardener to stimulate participation

We aimed to make people feel at home in the garden and to do this it was important to make them feel responsible for it.

Here are the strategies we used to achieve this:

- clearly explain the project's objectives
- organized a structure to guide people towards objectives
- valorise work accomplished and stimulate initiative
- explain the link between activities to encourage continued participation
- establish a relationship of confidence
- adapt the work according to number of families present
- take into account their opinions

These strategies are beneficial for both the families and project:

| Benefits for the families | Benefits for the project |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The work promotes discussions, exchanges, questions and new ideas. • Realization of tasks contributing to global project showing their role in its development. • Finding autonomy and taking initiative. • Develop a sense of teamwork. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A means to transmit knowledge • The quality of work improved as people felt personally responsible for it. • Gain time (gardener could delegate work and concentrate on his primary function) • Develop a cohesive group with a good work dynamic. |

We can see in the table below the reasons why the families participated in the project. We took just the three families who attended every week. Since I met these families most often, I based the table below on their experiences.

Table 2: Beneficial experiences

| Families | Family's specifications | Beneficial experiences |
|----------|--|--|
| Family 1 | large family average age of 40 years unemployed since 1 year no interest in finding work, happy living on social benefits driving license with car living in social housing and benefitting from food aid | « I am conscious of the opportunity to improve my vegetable consumption» « the project permits me to leave my house » "It is a means for me to escape, leave behind the everyday problems, discover other things which don't belong to my universe" |
| Family 2 | Couple, average age of 28 years unemployed and no driving license living in homeless shelter benefitting from several food aid programs | « I had nothing to do » It's a way of dealing with this boredom, I could speak with other people and learn different things. I cannot stay in the homeless shelter during the day. |
| Family 3 | Single person 33 years old with driving license and car Needs a social worker and psychologist. uses the food bank | « took me out of my isolation » « it allowed me to interact with other families and learn to create a garden » « I had access to quality vegetables» « it's more organic than organic because it's me that produced it» « i gave two courgettes to my social worker» sharing the vegetables. |

Personal review

The project "growing and cooking" gave me the opportunity to develop social skills as well as skills required to be a project manager. The experiences were very interesting given the diversity of people met during this project. I supervised several people of different ages, cultures and religions. To be able to do this, I developed some social skills (listening, patience and firmness). Moreover, through this project I could apply my school lessons in project management. It was interesting to consider all the factors present and create a project around them.

In the project, it was important to combine both the agricultural and social skills. The agriculture skills were important to develop the garden and for a general credibility. If you don't know what you are doing, people will not place their trust in you. Also, social skills are required to guide the people and understand their life situations.

But it is the social aspects which were most important in the project. In the table below we can see the profiles of three families who participated in the project. I would just like to clarify one point, I am not a psychologist and do not wish to become one. I just want to convey my experiences. To do this, I rely on my perception of the families experiences after discussions and interactions with them. Therefore I do not guarantee the accuracy of my comments.

Table 3: Situation I encountered during my work

| Situations encountered | Explanation | My solutions |
|---|--|---|
| Alcoholism: people arriving at the garden drunk | Result of a past event which caused suffering. | Quiet discussion outside the group to help and comfort that person. Afterwards I explained with firmness that this was unacceptable behaviour could not happen again. |
| Ego-centricity: people were difficult to manage | Result of a difficult past marked by a lack of self-esteem. This manifested itself through a constant need of attention and a denial of authority. | Always maintain a calm and firm stance (even in front of aggression) to stop this behaviour. The aim was to stimulate him to ask himself the right questions concerning his behaviour. |
| Depression: the slightest problem in everyday life could destabilize this person. | I do not know the origin of this problem. But I do know it was difficult as the slightest change could affect the people for the entire day and lead to a depressed state of mind. | First approach: listening to the people and showing them positive sides to a situation. Second approach: if this situation persisted I had to take a firmer stance to break the depression cycle, introduce new positive energy and encourage a change of attitude. |

Conclusion

The "growing and cooking" project permitted me to provide some useful tools to the families promoting a responsible lifestyle in relation to gardening and cooking. The goal was to improve the health of these people through natural products and preparing healthy meals. In fact, all the families introduced vegetables in their diets.

The fact that people were responsible for the garden helped them regain control of their lives, reintegrate into society and find a job. In 2014, the "family number three" decided to work in a social organisation to help other people.

It will be necessary to put in place certain tools to stimulate steady participation of the families throughout the season. Being sure of the number of people taking part makes the organisation much easier. The majority of families who participated in 2013, decided to return this year, in 2014.

Finally, it was a very good social experience for me personally and I thank all the people who participated in this project.

References

CASSAR F., 2013. Mettre en place une expérimentation d'ateliers de cuisine et de potager et formuler des recommandations pour les experts méthodologiques en charge de la réalisation d'un guide de formation des intervenants de l'aide alimentaire afin d'augmenter la consommation de fruits et légumes frais par les populations précaires ? Mémoire de fin d'études. Septembre 2013. Page 22-24.

DRAAF, 2013. Dispositif d'accompagnement et de formation des intervenants et bénéficiaires de l'aide alimentaire en région Picardie – Cuisine et potager nourriciers. Projet 2013-2014. Note de cadrage, mai 2013. Page 1-6.

GROSLEZIAT R., 2010. Le potager anti-crise : manger sain en dépensant peu. Éditions Broché.

POZO A., 2013. Fiche action : cuisine et jardins nourriciers. Projet territorial de développement durable « beauvaisis 2030 ».

THOMAS N., DEBUISSER S., NOEL H. et TRUGEON A., 2008. Baromètre santé nutrition – Consommations alimentaires en Picardie. 20 pages.