



— CASE STUDY

Accelerating the transition to a sustainable food ecosystem in the Netherlands.



Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

Impact Hub Amsterdam, part of the global Impact Hub Network, fosters collaborations for systemic change, focusing on ecosystem building to drive entrepreneurial action. From 2018 to 2024, it has co-hosted a Sustainable Food Ecosystem in the Netherlands, connecting over 250+ key stakeholders to promote innovation in the food sector.

APPROACH

Our methodology centres on building and supporting diverse actors who can collectively drive impactful change within the ecosystem. We begin by identifying a specific challenge, then engaging a coalition of partners to collaboratively address root causes and co-create innovative solutions. By harnessing the expertise and resources of aligned stakeholders, our issue-based ecosystem approach enables Impact Hub to address complex issues from multiple angles, fostering a more holistic impact. As an ecosystem enabler, Impact Hub connects key individuals, funding, tools, facilities, and best practices to support the growth of purpose-driven businesses.

CHALLENGE

The Netherlands, a global leader in food production and agriculture, have a large role in the systemic challenges caused in this industry. In 2023, Dutch agricultural exports made up more than 50% of the country's trade surplus, contributing EUR 50.4 billion to the economy. While productivity increases, over 124 000 metric tonnes of nitrogen are emitted, which contributes not only to climate change but also leads to groundwater pollution and biodiversity loss.

RESULTS

Through this ecosystem-building approach, Impact Hub has organised 12 events, conducted 12 growth programmes, and accelerated 150 food startups. Additionally, it launched the [Food Innovators](#) platform to provide entrepreneurs with access to essential networks and resources.

KEY PARTNERS

- The DOEN Foundation
- Ministry of Agriculture, Nature, and Food Quality
- Food Hub
- Municipality of Amsterdam
- Rabobank Foundation.



Challenges

The global transformation of food systems is one of the most urgent and complex issues facing the world today. Escalating climate changes, coupled with supply chain complexities, make it crucial to rethink how we produce and consume food.

The agro-food and agriculture sector is a cornerstone of the Dutch economy, ranking among the country's largest industries. In 2023, Dutch agricultural exports accounted for over 50% of the nation's trade surplus, contributing EUR 50.4 billion to the economy. While productivity increases, over 124 000 metric tonnes of nitrogen are emitted, which contributes not only to climate change but also leads to groundwater pollution and biodiversity loss. Currently, the food system is failing on several fronts:

Food security

The system struggles to meet the needs of a growing global population, raising concerns about future food availability.

Nutrition & public health

It fails to promote healthy diets, contributing to poor nutrition and public health outcomes.

Social inequality

Benefits are distributed unevenly, deepening social injustices and disproportionately impacting small-scale actors.

Environmental sustainability

Unsustainable practices deplete natural resources, erode biodiversity, and create inefficiencies in energy, water, and carbon usage. Moreover, [one-fifth of the food is wasted](#) during production or by consumers.



OUR APPROACH

Understand

In 2020, Impact Hub Amsterdam conducted a thorough mapping of the ecosystem, identifying key topics with significant momentum in terms of public goals and investor objectives, such as the shift in diet from 60% animal-based to 60% plant-based protein by 2030. The analysis revealed a critical gap: a lack of investment-ready impact startups focused on these crucial topics.

The identified topics include:

- Reducing food waste: Eg. Ketchup Club, Donny Craves.
- Replacing animal proteins with plant-based ingredients: Eg. Max & Bien, Karma Kebab, Olala.
- Creating more local (short) or fair (international) value chains: Eg. Rechtstreef, The good spice, Fiber Foods Africa, Wakuli.
- Biodiversity: Eg. Grounded, Hortimare, Wilderland.
- Inclusive and affordable healthy and sustainable food: Eg. Kolenkitkoks or Mama's koelkast.

While there were several networking organisations and research initiatives, there was no strong ecosystem that prioritised entrepreneurial solutions for the food transition.

By 2024, a lot has been happening across the country in parallel to our work. There is now a national Food Transition Coalition, a network of collaborating food investors, and regional startup communities—most notably Food Valley in Wageningen (food tech orientation).

While startup accelerators in 2018 primarily focused on tech, today all accelerators pay some level of attention to sustainability. Increasingly, institutions like banks and insurance companies are becoming more involved.

OUR APPROACH

Engage

The targets set by the government and experts on sustainable development created an opportunity for Impact Hub and impact entrepreneurs to stress the importance of their activities in meeting these goals.

In 2018, as these topics were not widely recognised, Impact Hub Amsterdam began organising events to raise awareness. Collaborations with partners like Commonland (on ecosystem restoration) and The Green Protein Alliance (on the protein shift) helped educate a broad audience.

From a systemic and sustainability perspective, the issues showed a lack of functional, investible solutions. This highlighted the need for an accelerator to identify startups that could tackle these challenges. The accelerator became a focal point for presenting solutions, hosting networking events, developing content for publications, and expanding the ecosystem with relevant stakeholders.



OUR APPROACH

Convene

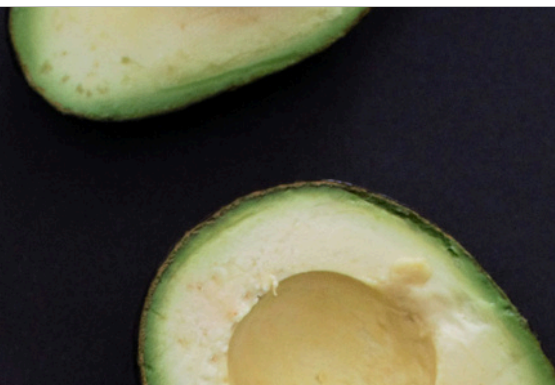
Impact Hub serves as the ecosystem facilitator, programme organiser, thematic expert, and place-based innovation space for entrepreneurs and partners. Through events and publications, they convene the various actors, providing a safe and trusted environment to collaborate on solving food transition challenges.

**OUR APPROACH**

Activate

Several opportunities were created for new initiatives to emerge and develop; from the incubator program Food Pioneers, to the 'co-working kitchen' at [Kitchen Republic](#) and colleges supporting startups, the foundation for new initiatives has been strengthened. Several expert and government organisations have been supporting these initiatives, like the City of Amsterdam and their Amsterdam Impact department, Flevo Campus and expert and investor networks.





OUR APPROACH

Consolidate

Creating an ecosystem map, which we continuously expanded with new stakeholders, was helpful. Additionally, we categorised ecosystem players based on their level of involvement and the timing of their engagement in activities. We began with broad, open activities—such as ideation and incubation sessions, and public events—before focusing on pioneers aligned with our food transition objectives. For an effective and structured programme, we invited the necessary expertise and stakeholders.

Maintaining an agenda-setting role was crucial, particularly by identifying systemic barriers preventing us from reaching our impact objectives in our publications and discussions with policymakers and other stakeholders.

While the number of funding opportunities has grown steadily, investor interest in food startups has declined. This has made it increasingly difficult to secure and renew funding for programmes like ours. Partners who provide resources and expertise are essential, as many entrepreneurs are unable to cover the full cost of the support they require, especially when they face limited funding and revenue streams.

OUR APPROACH

Amplify

The activities within the ecosystem, along with parallel efforts, have ushered in a new phase in the discussion about the food transition. Over the past 5–8 years, numerous publications and events have brought people together, fostering deeper conversations. A broader range of stakeholders is now involved, aligning on the need for change in areas such as soil management, biodiversity, protein cultivation, and waste reduction.

However, this does not imply that we have reached a "new normal" either in the country or across Europe. In fact, the debate surrounding the agrifood sector has become even more polarised, resulting in heated discussions and challenging political situations. According to the Transition Theory, periods of upheaval are necessary before settling into a new equilibrium, which may be the phase we are currently experiencing.



Key takeaways

- **Develop and validate a Theory of Change:** Impact Hub's methodology, drawing influence from [DRIFT's sustainability research](#) and the [Presencing Institute's Theory U](#), helped create a [Theory of Change](#) for the food ecosystem. To accelerate impact, we curated incubator and accelerator programmes, networking sessions, events, and publications, fostering a supportive ecosystem for food entrepreneurs with innovative solutions. The result is a close-knit community and a supportive ecosystem for food entrepreneurs with innovative, industry-disrupting solutions.
- **Collaborate with the ecosystem:** Our ecosystem approach, refined with insights from partners and professionals, was presented during the 2022 Food Ecosystem Day. Surveys from alumni of our programmes showed a 20% acceleration in business development and nearly €15 million in investments raised. Entrepreneurs rated 50% of new connections as highly relevant to their growth. Almost all scaleups survive longer than 2 years, over 90% still exist beyond 2 years of taking part in the Food Accelerator embedded in the ecosystem approach. While the Netherlands is a small country and much networking exists, there is considerable density and vitality of collaboration between stakeholders.
- **Guide entrepreneurs on positioning:** In helping entrepreneurs transition to a new economy, we emphasised a crucial 'positioning moment'—deciding whether to challenge mainstream stakeholders or address niche markets. Both strategies are valid but difficult to combine. We guide entrepreneurs in choosing a market position that aligns with their impact and business goals.

Results

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Food Innovators platform launched

12

Growth programmes conducted

12

Events organised

150

Food startups accelerated

>300

People or organisations mapped

Partnership outcomes

- **Plant-based transition impact:** Shifted the perception of plant-based diets from a niche interest into a mainstream choice. Plant-based options are now a recognised commercial differentiator, evidenced by adoption among hotels, restaurants, and caterers.
- **Policy influence:** Influenced Amsterdam City's food strategy, resulting in the inclusion of entrepreneurship as a specific action line, recognising food entrepreneurs as key stakeholders.
- **Support for food entrepreneurs:** More than 50% of engaged food entrepreneurs secured investment, reflecting growing acceptance of innovative food transition approaches. Collaborative efforts among food-focused investors have led to aligned strategies that support sustainable food pipeline development and deal facilitation, achieving a measurable success rate of 90% for food enterprises.
- **Sustainable products availability:** Enhanced the presence of sustainable food products in consumer markets, particularly within the plant-based sector. Accelerated solutions for both B2B and B2C markets have bolstered readiness for partnerships and market integration.
- **Innovation driving mainstream adoption:** Early innovations in plant-based and sustainable food solutions are now entering the mainstream. Some are influencing broader industry practices or being acquired by major players seeking to mitigate their supply chains with more sustainable options.
- **Ecosystem engagement:** Engaged over 300 stakeholders across various levels of involvement, with more than 50% actively collaborating and sustaining long-term engagement. This approach has fostered a strong sense of community among participants, promoting ongoing collaboration and active cross-referrals. The ecosystem continues to offer streamlined resource access and effective knowledge sharing, driving continuous progress and partnership development.





Partner quotes

Impact Hub has been at the top of my list of favourite networks for years. They form a fantastic ecosystem that has proven capable of making a positive contribution to major issues, including the food transition. The programs are of high quality, the events are inspiring, and the staff is knowledgeable and engaged. The friendly and personal atmosphere at the Hub goes hand in hand with a professional and dedicated approach.

Food Investor

For entrepreneurs working on the food system of the future, a trusted environment where they can learn from and with each other is often invaluable. It benefits the entrepreneurs, but more importantly, it benefits the broader food system, which, through these entrepreneurs, sees that things can indeed be done differently. The Impact Hub accelerator significantly increases the chances for these entrepreneurs to make serious changes and have a meaningful impact.

Food SME Network

Sustainable innovation is needed, not only from the established players but also from forward-thinking food changemakers in ecosystems like those Impact Hub and its partners create. We wholeheartedly support this and contribute to the activities of Impact Hub by sharing our knowledge and network.

International Bank, Food Sector Specialist

Impact Hub is a creative and energetic catalyst and connector that accelerates sustainability. They are deeply embedded in the worlds of entrepreneurship, knowledge, and capital, and are exceptionally effective in linking entrepreneurial individuals from these three areas. In short, a bridge-builder of great significance.

National Food Transition Coalition

Thank you!



Inspired by the work we do?
Get in touch with us to start your
journey toward making an impact!