

# The right food at the

**Food prices are escalating, making it harder for those on low incomes to buy fruit and veg. Jessica Mitchell meets a man whose life is devoted to making it easier.**

In the bright light of day, the work of the charity Community Food Enterprise (CFE) is fun – there are friendly food stalls selling great produce, at low prices, at a dozen local schools; lively breakfast clubs with cute children eating free fruit; and a mobile shop staffed by the lovely John and Lorraine, who, on the day I visit say, “We are off to Manor Park today – we’ll make about six stops, mostly to local estates. People really appreciate us bringing the fruit and veg to their doorsteps.”

But, it all starts, as with many things, in the cold, and gloom – it was 4.30am when Eric Samuel, MBE and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CFE, picked me up from a street corner in West Ham, in the charity’s van, for the daily visit to Spitalfields market to buy fruit and veg. Although this one-off visit seems extraordinarily audacious to me, for years this was Samuel’s daily start to the day. Up at the crack of dawn, head to market, then back to HQ to price up and ready the fresh produce for distribution – with all his other work – fundraising, networking, setting up new community food access projects – squeezed in between.

“I still make sure I get to market once a month or so, it keeps me in touch, but I’ll let you in on a secret, I hate driving this van, it’s so damn big,” says Samuel. He is spared the six day a week visits thank to Hassan Enver – the deceptively mild mannered buyer who now does the dealing at

market – making sure the limited pennies of CFE go as far as they can, and says Enver, “On the best fruit and veg, we have hardly any waste because we buy very good quality.” This a theme picked up by Samuel, “We have it down to a fine art now. Quality is so important to the people we sell to, just being cheap is not good enough.”

The people CFE sells to, or supplies free, are primarily those of Newham, the east London borough. It is one of the poorest in the country and the most diverse – and the official statistics bear out what is clear to Samuel everyday, “too few shops selling reasonably priced fruit and veg,” to a community which already doesn’t get enough, with many suffering from problems of diet related disease.

CFE tackles these problems through a range of projects including: low cost fruit and veg stands at workplaces and schools; the provision of free fruit to local schools for breaktime snacks (for all primary school children through year 6, in contrast to the government’s School Fruit Scheme that runs only through year 2); and the mobile shop. “We are no threat to Tesco, for the simple reason that we plug the gaps, we work in areas supermarkets are not interested in. You can’t compare what we do,” says Samuel.

Samuel is passionate about what these people deserve, “This community has the right to the right



**At Hardy’s exotics in Spitalfields Market, Eric Samuel (right) notes that his ethnic customers really know about fruit and veg and demand the best quality. Samuel shares their passion, but still finds it hard to get his five-a-day – he is just too busy.**

food, to what they want, if it’s local that is great, but it is their choice.” The Mission Statement of CFE makes these principles absolutely clear: “Everyone in the community has the right not just to food, but to the right food. At the heart of our belief is the principle that access to food is a right, not a privilege. The food and drink we consume should be safe, nutritious, affordable, accessible and culturally acceptable.”

Samuel’s dogged ferocity on these points is one of the most endearing things about him. And, my goodness does he work for this – any conversation with him involves following him around while he drags boxes, loads vans, sweeps floors – he is not the kind of CEO that sits in the office greeting dignitaries. I met him first, not long after he got started in this work, about ten years ago. As a resident of the Cranberry Lane Estate in Newham, he set up a food co-op, and drew in his,

**Lita Webb, Eric Samuel, and Hassan Enver at work in the CFE warehouse, soon to be developed into an even larger food distribution centre. Samuel is keen to ensure CFE survival by developing new projects, and running more efficiently so the charity can be less reliant on unreliable grant funding. The new centre means they will be able to more easily take on contracts that earn more profit – such as supplying Canary Wharf offices with fruit and veg. This profit can then be ploughed back into school co-ops, breakfast clubs and free school fruit schemes.**



# right price

now longtime, co-worker, operations manager, Lita Webb. "Eric came to a tenants' association meeting, I had given up work – in shops, and I didn't want to do it anymore. But, look at me now," she says, as she laughs and goes to get the stock ready for the mobile shop.

Since then, these two have worked together, in various incarnations, but always with the same essential mission says Samuel, "The bottom of the chain is most vital, what is happening with food access is that funders are forgetting the grassroots and giving too much money for coordination. No one wants to pay for delivery so we have got to be entrepreneurial." Indeed, Samuel, a former banker, is entrepreneurial, full of plans for social enterprises in local schools, around the Olympics, for further development of CFE's National Training Programme for Community Food Workers and for their new food distribution centre that will trim visits to Spitalfields to once a week

Which is where we arrived eventually, as the sun finally came up – to the sort of organised mayhem that made me glad I was with someone who knew what he was doing. It is huge, stall after stall selling produce from all over the world, stacked to the ceiling, all being moved around by mini-forklift truck drivers who zip through the aisles at speeds and angles that make a dazed stroll as dangerous as a perambulation down the M1. Samuel has a list, has



**The day I visited in April, the mobile shop was selling at least 25 types of fruit and veg including: carrots for 45p a kilogram (kg); courgettes for £1.45 a kg; large white cabbages for 50p; and Royal Gala apples £1 a kg.**

**That same week, a nearby supermarket was selling carrots at 75p a kg; courgettes at more than £2 a kg; white cabbages for 75p; and Royal Gala at £1.59kg.**

faxed it to their three regular suppliers – fruit, veg and exotics – and off we set.

"The guys we work with are great, but you have got to know what you are doing as these people will show you no mercy," says Samuel. He wonders how the actual growers make any money – much of the produce is sold at big auctions in Europe to so-called senders – who then ship it off to clients who have stalls at Spitalfields. The senders themselves only get their money when the stallholders have sold

**CFE has more than 50 volunteers who run stalls at some workplaces and schools, like this one at Tate & Lyle. One of the workers here said, "For the last six months food has been getting more expensive, but prices here are a lot cheaper than at the supermarket." For another, "This helps me because I don't have to try to make time after work to go out and buy fruit and veg."**



**These new 'Juice for life' bars will sell freshly squeezed juices and smoothies. CFE will loan**

**some to schools, with a start up grant, so students can run them as their own social enterprise. Others, fitted with motors, will be rented to social entrepreneurs for sales around Newham.**

the produce, and if the stallholder can't sell, or has to drop the price, the sender can come and collect his fruit and veg, or bear the loss. Out of interest, Samuel once costed out what the economics of yam importation would be – at that point, £4 would've covered all costs for bringing a big box of yams from Kenya, that would have sold on the market for £14, so, "Imagine the poor farmer, who knows what he is getting."

Prices in the market are bad this year, "I have been coming for seven or eight years and there wasn't much change, this year is bad. English produce is always more expensive, but everything is bad this year. It doesn't half make a lot of difference." According to Samuel's vegetable supplier, Kevin, "Look across there at those lemons, they're £20 a box, usually they would never get above £5 across the season." At the exotics stall, Hardy's, prices are high too, but Samuel says, "Hardy ain't gonna put us wrong, he will do right by us and we have to have the things supermarkets don't sell, for the ethnic market." As we finish, Samuel is determined to find a box of mangoes, but just cannot stick the prices, "That is damn ridiculous, £12 for 8, those are supermarket prices."

The van loaded up, we head back to CFE – now a large warehouse and offices – on the grounds of Tate & Lyle's HQ. For, it is Tate & Lyle which has come through for CFE, giving them space, equipment, money and training opportunities, all without extracting much in the way of publicity value out of the work says Samuel, "There is no way we could deliver the service we do without them, the funding is not there. I have absolutely no problem with it, and don't feel they use us to promote their products."

CFE has tried to interest government in using their model as a national one, but there has been no action forthcoming. Before I leave Samuel to it, he tells me, "Sometimes the spirit is down but I am committed to the community of Newham. These people have suffered. I am committed to change and I hate to admit defeat. So, we will have to keep up the entrepreneurial spirit."

■ [www.community-food-enterprise.org.uk](http://www.community-food-enterprise.org.uk)