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COMMUNITY BACKS BID TO BYPASS SUPERMARKETS

An ambitious project designed to connect shoppers directly with farmers and to support independent retailers and wholesalers aims to crowd fund \$100,000 to launch in Australia.

The Open Food Network, an online marketplace that makes it easier to find, buy, and sell local sustainable food, received startup funding from VicHealth via its Seed Challenge program, to conduct early trials.

More than 170 individuals passionate about an alternative to the supermarkets giants have already donated \$15,000 towards the cause.

The Open Food Network is a bias-free, not-for-profit website which connects farmers with distribution hubs and customers, to make affordable fresh food accessible to all Australians. The website will be further developed, with the organisers currently [crowd-funding](#) to launch the open beta version across Australia by the end of the year.

Open Food Network co-founder Kirsten Larsen said the food supply system has major issues.

"The Open Food Network has been designed in response to major problems in our food system, including too much power wielded by just a few players," Ms Larsen said.

"The supermarkets and other 'big guys' are offering a raw deal and little bargaining power to both farmers and end customers. Proudly not-for-profit, the money we raise will go to development of this important resource for producers and independent food businesses fighting to provide an alternative to the supermarket duopoly."

Following successful trials in Australia, the Open Food Network is building a strong following overseas, with demand for use of the system from food hubs in the UK, USA, Canada and India. A UK trial, with Europe's largest local food network, the Fife Diet, launches next week.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said the idea of using technology to open the doors to fresh and affordable food for all is the way of the future.

"Digital technology has opened our world up to more options. We don't have to rely on big corporations to source our food for us any longer. By connecting consumers with the growers, and supporting local businesses, it's better for the environment, our community and our farmers," Ms Rechter said.

"We would love to see this idea grow to reach all Australians and we know it will make a big difference."

Local farmer Shona Crawford of Vegie Bunch, from Pearcedale in Melbourne's South East, is involved with a trial of the network in Victoria.

"We are always looking for new ways to get our food to businesses and the community around us, but it is time-consuming and bitsy. The trial is opening up possibilities and we're excited about what it could mean for small farmers like us," Ms Crawford said.

The Open Food Network has small trials currently in operation in Mildura, Gippsland and South East Melbourne. Go to www.openfoodnetwork.org.au for details.

Help them to launch in Australia: <http://startsomegood.com/openfoodnetwork>

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