



**Case-study report on
Freedom Crickets -
Sustainable insect
farming with the social
reintegration of young
people in custody
January 2026**

Social Bugs

Partners

Bugging Denmark

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This case study is based on an expert interview kindly agreed to by Tiago Leitão, Co-founder and CEO of Aproximar, combined with experience of the key person working in the project.

1. Criteria for selecting case study

Freedom Crickets, a Portuguese initiative, located at Leiria Youth Prison (EPL-J), meets the four core criteria of the SSE. Firstly, it operates directly in the edible insect farming sector, focusing on the sustainable production of crickets (*Acheta domestica*). Secondly, it has a clear social mission: to empower and reintegrate young people in custody by providing them with training, skills, and entrepreneurial pathways linked to sustainable food production. Thirdly, the cooperative reinvests resources into social and environmental purposes, ensuring that benefits are channelled towards community development and ecological impact rather than profit. Finally, it actively involves vulnerable groups, particularly young people in custody and those recently released, thereby addressing exclusion and inequality.

To summarize, Freedom Crickets Program combines sustainable insect farming with the social reintegration of young people in custody, preparing them for employment and life after release through training, work experience, and psychosocial support.

For making it operational and sustainable is necessarily to have the unit with safety conditions

- Production unit: 226 m², capacity up to 24 tonnes/year.
- Participants (per year): 15 young people in the program, divided in two working groups, involved in rearing, collecting (“harvesting”), and in the future, processing crickets.
- Support model: Vocational training, mentoring, employability skills, and post-release follow-up.
- Partnerships:
 - Aproximar (APX) – Certified Training, capacity-building activities,
 - Estabelecimento Prisional de Leiria – Jovens (EPL-J) – infrastructure & institutional support
- Guarantee Circular economy (future goal): Use of agricultural by-products from EPL-J in cricket feed.

2. Background of the case study

Freedom Crickets Unit and Programme was established at the Leiria Youth Prison (EPL-J) as part of a reintegration programme for young people in custody. The initiative brings together sustainable insect farming and social reintegration, following a holistic approach that includes vocational training, psychosocial support, mentoring, and post-release follow-up. The project is delivered by Aproximar (APX), that combines its expertise in social innovation, education, and criminal justice, in partnership with EPLJ’s experience and networks within the justice system. While APX leads on programme design, training, and capacity-building activities, EPLJ facilitates access to young people in custody and supports the integration of project activities within the justice framework. Together, they ensure the effective delivery of initiatives aimed at social reintegration, skills development, and empowerment of vulnerable youth. A dedicated team works daily at Leiria Youth Prison, which houses young people aged between 16 to 25 years old. Within the prison, Freedom Crickets runs an insect farming programme where 15 participants per year gain practical skills and strengthen existing abilities through informal learning, preparing them for social and professional reintegration. After release, participants benefit from a mentoring scheme and personalised support to help them secure employment and continue their pathway towards inclusion.

Freedom Crickets was established at the Leiria Youth Prison (EPL-J) as a pioneering reintegration programme for young people in custody. The initiative began when the prison's deputy director for economic activities contacted Tiago Leitão (Aproximar CEO), seeking a social entrepreneurship project to utilize the prison's agricultural capacity with insect production. The project was designed to link the production of sustainable protein with the rehabilitation of young inmates. At the time of its inception (2020), the team could not find any other projects globally that combined cricket production with a prison environment for young people, making benchmarking impossible. This lack of existing models meant the project was highly innovative but also carried risk. However, implementing this in a prison setting required navigating a complex environment where security is the primary priority, followed closely by health, particularly challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these hurdles, the project successfully introduced young participants to the green economy, allowing them to contribute to fighting climate change while acquiring structured work habits essential for the highly regulated food industry.

3. Compliance of the project with SSE

Freedom Crickets is aligned with SSE:

- Operates in edible insects' sector (sustainable production).
- Explicit social mission: inclusion of vulnerable groups.
- Reinvests resources into social & environmental impact.
- Participatory governance via multi-stakeholder collaboration.

4. Major challenges and lessons learned

The Major Challenges & Lessons learned are:

- Institutional: Adapting to prison logistics & security.
- Regulatory: Navigating evolving edible insects standards rearing.
- Social: Overcoming stigma (insect consumption & young people on custody reintegration).
- Financial: Ensuring sustainability while prioritising reinvestment.
- Lessons learned: Strong partnerships, adaptability, and communication are essential.

Industry opacity and lack of benchmarking

The insect farming sector is in an early stage, characterized by a lack of open information sharing. Freedom Crickets could not benchmark against similar social initiatives because none existed, and private companies were reluctant to share intellectual property or business models to maintain a competitive edge.

Approach: The team had to proceed with a "discovery" mindset, relying on funding to mitigate the risks of testing new production models without a clear roadmap.

Lesson learned: In a nascent industry, social entrepreneurs must possess both management resilience and technical competence (or strong technical partnerships) to survive the initial "valley of death" where information is scarce.

Regulatory and contextual barriers

The project launched during a period of legal uncertainty regarding the "Novel Foods" regulation in Europe and was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a prison context, security and

health protocols override all other activities; when the pandemic hit, the prison had to close access, halting the program and threatening the survival of the biological assets (the crickets).

Approach: The team navigated the slow licensing process (achieved in 2022) and adapted to the rigid security constraints of the prison environment.

Lesson learned: Securing a "champion" within the institution—in this case, a prison director passionate about the job—is key to overcoming bureaucratic and operational hurdles.

Aligning Social Mission with Technical Partners

A critical challenge arose from the partnership with a private technical entity. While the technical partner focused on profit and production efficiency, Freedom Crickets prioritized the social mission (rehabilitation) over surpluses.

Approach: The project leaders had to constantly clarify that surpluses were a means to serve the mission, not the end goal. This friction highlighted the difficulty of finding partners who possess both technical expertise and social drive.

Lesson learned: Future initiatives should define the specifications of cooperation with technical partners much earlier. It is vital to find technical leads who understand that in the SSE, the mission dictates the business model.

Commercial sustainability vs. social value

While the program is sustainable organizationally (through grants and prison support for the rehabilitation program), commercial sustainability (selling the product) has been slower to realize.

Approach: The project utilizes a "cross-subsidization" view where the service provided (rehabilitation) is funded by the state/grants, while the product sales (crickets for animal feed/zoos) are developed gradually to support post-release mentoring and other activities.

Lesson: Investment in sales and marketing was underestimated. If starting over, the team would invest more in a dedicated salesperson and faster implementation of the production unit.

Dual Mission: social purpose with financial needs

A critical takeaway from Freedom Crickets is the complex balance between maintaining a social mission and achieving financial viability in a nascent industry.

- **Defining Sustainability and Sales:** Tiago highlights a distinction between organizational sustainability and commercial success. The organization can be sustainable through grants and institutional support solely by delivering the rehabilitation program. However, to fund the "full length" of the vision, specifically post-release support, housing, and mentoring for the youth, commercial sales are necessary.
- **The Cross-Subsidization Model:** A possibility for social entrepreneurs is the logic of "cross-subsidization," like how banks might sell a loan to cross-sell insurance. The core "product" funded by the state is the rehabilitation service, while the commercial sale of crickets is intended to subsidize the additional social support layers that grants do not cover.
- **Friction with Partners:** This dual mission created friction with technical partners who prioritized surpluses and profit. For the social entrepreneur, surpluses are a means to serve the mission, not the end goal. This misalignment highlighted the difficulty of finding partners who possess both technical expertise and a "social driven goal".

5. How to work with young people in prison with insect production

Implementing an insect farming program in a youth prison requires specific strategies to engage participants and manage the unique environment.

- **The "Green" Appeal:** Framing the work as a contribution to the "green economy" and the fight against climate change proved highly attractive to young participants. It offers them a sense of purpose, allowing them to tell society they are contributing to a global solution.
- **Structure as Rehabilitation:** The food industry is highly regulated and requires strict adherence to procedures. This necessity becomes a rehabilitation tool: inmates learn to follow structured workflows and safety protocols, which helps "open their minds" and prepares them for professional life.
- **Incentives and Behaviour:** The program uses a tangible incentive structure. Participants receive a training grant, but they also have an incentive scheme linked to behavioural goals. Higher grant payments indicate that the youth have avoided disciplinary measures and internal problems, serving as a key indicator of the program's success.
- **Managing Resistance:** Initial reactions mirror the general public's "yuck factor". However, youth with agricultural backgrounds adapt faster. The resistance usually fades quickly once they realize the insects are harmless, moving from hesitation to acceptance.

6. Competences for social entrepreneurs in the edible insect market

To succeed in this specific intersection of social economy and insect farming, the interview identifies a specific "triad" of necessary skills, along with soft skills required for the current market maturity.

The Skill Triad: A successful team needs to combine three distinct areas:

1. **Management/Entrepreneurship:** The ability to navigate business risks and the "valley of death".
2. **Technical Knowledge:** Expertise in insect biology and production systems (or a strong partnership with someone who has it).
3. **Social Sector Expertise:** Deep knowledge of the specific environment (i.e., prisons, schools) and how to navigate its bureaucracy and partnerships.

Communication and marketing: Because the European market still holds significant resistance to insect consumption, a social entrepreneur must possess strong marketing skills to "educate" the consumer. It is not enough to produce; one must be able to convince the market to try the product.

Collaborative networking: The insect industry is currently characterized by secrecy and IP protection, which hinders growth. A key competence for future social entrepreneurs is the ability to break this trend and "join efforts," sharing knowledge to help the industry mature together.

Resilience: Given the lack of legal frameworks initially and the operational difficulties (like COVID-19 lockdowns), resilience is cited as a fundamental trait for survival – for example, other entrepreneurs can face different "resilience tests".

7. Conclusion

The impact and Freedom Crickets Programme contribution ramifies on 4 different knowledge areas: Social: Empowers young people on custody with employability, facing and working entrepreneurial skills; Environmental: Promotes sustainable protein production; Systemic: Shows insect farming as a tool for both Ecological/organic innovation and social justice.



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