

What can smallholders contribute to local food security and sustainable land management?: Developing a research agenda to challenge assumptions about smallholders

My talk (15 mins)

Discussion groups (20 mins)

Plenary and conclusions (20 mins)

Conclusions (5 mins)

1) Introduction

Hello, and thank you for coming to this workshop, despite the changed time.

Many of us in this room are signed up supporters of small-scale, diverse ecological agriculture of the kind Colin Tudge promotes under the label “Real Farming”

Inspiration for this workshop has arisen from a challenging year trying to help smallholders gain planning permission to start just these sorts of enterprises, and an awareness of just how big a battle for minds, as well as hearts we are facing.

My objective in this workshop is to promote a discussion of how we can best equip ourselves for this battle.

Follow up to the group – Keen **NOT** to establish another new e-mail group, that needs regular communication. However, I will undertake to type up and circulate notes arising from plenary, so please leave your e-mail address by the door if you'd like to get these.

2) Planning challenges

Key barrier => hard to earn sufficient income from ecological agriculture to cover the costs of living in a conventional house.

Sustainability benefits of living in a low impact dwelling on site (renewable energy generation – solar and wood fuel; rainwater harvest; compost loos; not having to commute)

Planning law (NPPF) only allows this for full-time workers with an essential need.

One might think this was straightforward to argue, but believe me it is not!

Objection from local people – voice concerns about traffic, landscape impact. Real concerns are about a different, unfamiliar kind of farming.

Highlighted for me that there is no room for complacency in making claims about “Real Farming” - we need to prove and demonstrate its benefits and viability

3) Underlying assumptions (make into a poster)

From us

- Ecological farming is more sustainable
- Diverse, integrated holdings are more productive than monoculture
- Finding alternatives to fossil fuel use is good for climate change prevention
- More efficient use/management of natural resources (soil, water, manure etc)
- Benefits from increased biodiversity/seed diversity
- More satisfying, skilled employment

From objectors

- Smallholders are “hobby” farmers not “real” farmers
- They can't produce as much food as “serious” farmers
- Aims are well intentioned but naïve
- Impossible to be economically viable on small acreage
- Weeds and mixed enterprises look scruffy
- Mess and clutter from using and storing recycled materials, wind generators, solar panels etc
- New entrants won't engage with the local community

4) A challenge on two levels

- Policy level - Can “real farming” offer a viable alternative to “sustainable intensification”?
- Local objector level

A dialogue based on facts rather than assumptions is needed to allay fears on both levels.

Our challenge is to collect robust evidence to demonstrate the benefits of ecological agriculture and then to communicate it. How can we best do this?

Activity (20mins)

Divide into 4 groups, two looking at our assumptions and two looking at how to address objector assumptions.

2 questions

- 1) How can we address these assumptions?
- 2) What research/action is already being done to address these assumptions?

Plenary (20 minutes)

Give each group 5 minutes to report back their findings. Any surplus time can be used for a general, bigger discussion of findings

Conclusions

I hope you've found this session a helpful focus to look at how best we can further the cause of sustainable agriculture. We each of us – whether farmers, smallholders, activists, researchers have a responsibility to be ambassadors for ecological food production. As we stand at the beginning of 2013, I hope you will rise to the challenge of addressing some of these assumptions with me.