

Update for PAN Regional Centres and Working Groups on UK activities in agroecology

PAN UK, September 2016

With support from the Marisla Foundation, facilitated via PAN North America, PAN UK is compiling information to inform colleagues in other PAN regions of relevant research, policy and practical experiences in agroecological farming and food provision in the European region.

While several UK NGOs have actively promoted agroecology in developing countries, until recently there was very little happening on agroecology in the British context. That is now starting to change. This first update provides a summary of activities in the UK.

Policy level progress

An important assessment of the potential of agroecological approaches to address and mitigate the impacts of high input agriculture on biodiversity, environment and ecosystem services was produced in 2015. ***The Role of Agroecology in Sustainable Intensification*** report¹ was compiled by leading organic research and conservation biology institutes and public sector agencies in the UK. It looks at three of the most familiar cropping systems in the UK which relate to agroecological principles: integrated crop/farm management; organic farming; and agroforestry systems. The assessment compares each system with intensive, conventional systems, with respect to their contribution to: (i) productivity; (ii) energy use and greenhouse gas emissions; (iii) biodiversity and related ecosystem services; (iv) soil and water conservation; and (v) profitability. To gain the attention of UK policymakers, any advocacy needs to be framed in the context of 'sustainable intensification' and this assessment makes clear how organic systems are currently discriminated against in a narrow focus on yield alone, while their benefits for biodiversity and provision of public goods are not given enough recognition. It also highlights that introducing more agroforestry into UK farmland could provide some win-win gains. Key recommendations are:

- ✓ Put more priority on sustainability aspects in public-funded work on sustainable intensification (i.e. eco-functional and knowledge intensification; environmental protection; ecosystem services)
- ✓ Ensure the potential of agroecological approaches is more widely recognised and developed. Agroecology is not just an option for, but an essential component of, sustainable intensification.
- ✓ Develop more suitable evaluation metrics to support business and policy decision-making, both at farm and regional/landscape level
- ✓ Put more emphasis on agroecological approaches, and not just technological or risk management solutions, in policies to mitigate the negative impacts of agricultural inputs (fertilisers, pesticides, anti-microbials, anti-helminthics)
- ✓ Use agri-environmental support, payments for ecosystem services (PES) and market-based policies (e.g. product certification) to encourage adoption of agroecological approaches
- ✓ Improve agroecological information and knowledge exchange systems, building on farmer knowledge and active producer participation

- ✓ Put a stronger focus on agroecological approaches in educational provision, at vocational skills, further and higher education levels, reviewing and updating curricula;
- ✓ Give more focus to developing agroecological approaches in research and innovation policy, not just their comparative evaluation.

The authors have called for an agroecology action plan for England², which could include some elements similar to the pioneering agroecology law in France (see separate Update).

An important step forward on the policy front was the formation in 2011 of the **All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Agroecology for Sustainable Food & Farming**. This is an informal interest group of UK parliamentarians from different political parties, in which NGOs and others can take part. It hosts meetings to share new findings, discuss policy issues and may commission enquiries or workshops on different aspects of agroecology.

In 2015 the APPG on Agroecology conducted an enquiry into soil health and protection³, with expert evidence from different academic, farming and practitioner organisations. Its findings highlight a worrying lack of knowledge about the status of British soils and the almost total lack of policy attention to protecting soils for future generations. Key policy recommendations are:

- Government policy does not go far enough to preserve soil quality and the role of soil as both a carbon sink and emitter must be addressed in the UK climate change strategy
- Soil is often the most neglected component of land use and policy makers, farm businesses and advisers are less likely to consider soil issues as the cause or solution to a problem.
- There should be soil assessment plans to give a clear picture of soil health at national level
- Maize crops grown for energy use are often implicated in soil compaction and flooding. Much more needs to be done to safeguard soils, with policy encouraging more extensive farming.
- Policy measures should give incentives to farmers to improve soil organic matter, e.g. by diversifying cropping systems with agroforestry

Research, advice and information

Some promising shoots of growth on agroecological research have sprung up in the UK academic sector. Most notable is the **Centre for Agroecology, Water & Resilience (CAWR)** at University of Coventry. CAWR is the largest centre in the world doing transdisciplinary research on the links between agroecology and sustainable food systems, water management, and community and socio-ecological resilience. It also runs an MSc course in Agroecology and Food Security. CAWR has long established links with Garden Organic and their staff working on organics and agroecology in developing countries, however, its research programme also includes work relevant to the UK and other industrialised countries. For example, it is a partner in the European FOODMETRES project, which is assessing the “land footprint” of urban food consumption in terms of the socio-economic and environmental impacts. CAWR is helping to identify lessons from a case study

in London on food planning and urban growing, to understand better what the possibilities are for production closer to the city, with fewer steps in the food chain and the use of less non-renewable resources.

Several other British universities are conducting research relevant to agroecology, both in terms of ecological interactions between species in cropping systems and how these could be used to reduce dependency on agrochemical inputs and of broader social and economic aspects of food provision, renewable resources, community participation and food policy. The UK agroecology project by the Ecological Land Co-operative lists 10 universities plus several agricultural research centres, including organic or biodynamic ones, involved in agroecological studies. This project compiled a resources web-section in 2014 on research initiatives, papers and articles.

More dialogue between the organic sector and other British farmers and crop advisors is something that PAN UK has wanted to see for a long time. A welcome initiative is the new **Agricology** portal⁴, set up to share research findings and practical advice for farmers in the UK on “practical, sustainable farming regardless of labels”. Agricology is a collaboration between more than 20 UK organisations involved in research, farmer support, policy, nature conservation, including organic institutes but also those in integrated and conventional systems. It aims to get more constructive collaboration and experience sharing between people working in different production systems. Its resource section hosts guidance material on crops, soil, livestock, environment, farm management and economics and sustainability concepts. There are also farmer profiles and blogs to share experiences.

Other sources of information are given in PAN UK's **List of relevant resources & websites for agroecology**.

Practical experiences in agroecology

The last two to three years have seen more interest in agroecology in UK and several initiatives and projects begin. Many of these involve community-managed land, often linked with communal housing projects, and community-supported groups growing food for local people. Efforts to reduce the distance between food producers and consumers and to reconnect people to the land are important aims for these first agroecological steps.

The following is not an exhaustive list of all organisations involved in the agroecology movement. Many of the long-standing organic farming organisations continue their valuable roles, as well as coalitions and alliances, such as Sustain, which have done excellent work on promoting local food growing, involving schools and other public sector agencies. There are also numerous individuals, some with their own small farms or food companies, community organisations and a growing army of volunteers.

The **Ecological Land Co-operative**'s aim is to support new entrants to ecological agriculture. It raised funding for and set up livelihood opportunities for 3 families to grow and sell fruit, vegetable and herb crops in a 9 hectare cluster of smallholdings in Devon, including living accommodation and joint facilities. These are serviced using renewable and low-carbon resources, including off-grid solar electricity generation and a rainwater harvesting system. The co-operative undertakes research on how to improve the economic viability of smallholdings and they now have a business plan to create a further 22 affordable smallholdings by 2020.

The **Agroecology Land Trust** was created to advocate and implement a transition to agroecological methods of land management to help secure food sovereignty, energy independence, and environmental regeneration in a way that is financially viable and socially just. Its founders are exploring a new approach to farming, housing and energy production, to address the food, energy, and soil crises that industrialised countries are facing, through renewed connection with land and place. The ALT's first project is to make use of 28 hectares of woodland in Wales for nature conservation, the production of medicinal and gourmet mushrooms, horticulture and animal husbandry.

The **Permaculture Association UK** is an active and rapidly growing player in the British agroecological movement. It facilitates a network of demonstration sites and the website has a searchable map of relevant projects. Many of these are pilot and 'pop-up' projects on small plots of land owned by public agencies but temporarily allowing access to local organisations and volunteers to set up permaculture activities. The Association's knowledge base contains information on permaculture principles, design and practical solutions, covering built environment; finance and economics; land and nature stewardship; health and well-being; tools and technology; culture and education; governance and community management. It also runs research projects and develops guidance for practitioners on how to run simple trials, e.g. on feasibility of growing larger range of vegetables in small areas in terms of yields and labour requirements. It is looking to develop suitable metrics for agroecology. The Permaculture Association blog features experiences and practical guidance for citizens (e.g. on making a rain garden to reduce urban flooding risk from paved front gardens) to more conceptual work on social and ethical principles (e.g. on how permaculture can improve mental health). The Permaculture Research Digest provides news of latest research, projects and experiences worldwide.

The **Landworkers' Alliance** is an organisation of farmers, growers and land-based workers, set up in 2012. It campaigns for policies to support the infrastructure and markets central to its members livelihoods, building alliances and encouraging solidarity. The LWA has been a member of *La Via Campesina* food sovereignty network of small producers since 2013. The LWA raises awareness of the role that small-scale producers, family farmers and land-based workers in the UK play in providing food security, environmental stewardship, rural livelihoods, strong communities, animal welfare and high-quality affordable food. It calls for: a national food policy based on food sovereignty principles; redirecting UK and EU public subsidies to systems of farming and food provisioning that deliver more social and environmental public goods; support for young farmers and new entrants; increasing affordable access to land. Its current campaign after the UK decision to leave the EU is to make the strongest possible case for a British Agricultural Policy that supports small scale, community and family farmers.

Community –supported Agriculture (CSA) Network UK was set up in 2014 to provide a national platform to promote CSA, encourage policymakers to recognise its benefits and to track the growth of the CSA movement in the UK. Its public website allows citizens to find out where their nearest CSA food producers are and to get involved via purchasing and support. CSA network UK give support and advice to CSA farms and community initiatives, for example, on suitable cropping plans for vegetable production, with information on likely economic returns. It provides resources, training and mentoring to individuals and communities wanting to start a CSA farm.

References

1. The Role of Agroecology in Sustainable Intensification. Lampkin et al., 2015. Land Use Policy group. Via: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/A1652615.pdf> See also a PowerPoint by the lead author highlighting key issues, via: <http://agroecology-appg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Agroecology-and-sustainable-intensification-APPG.pdf>
2. An agroecology plan for England? Nic Lampkin, Organic Research Centre. Presentation to the APPG Agroecology meeting, May 2016. Via: <http://agroecology-appg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/An-Agroecology-Action-Plan-for-England.pptx>
3. The four short APPG reports on soil health and protection are available via: <http://agroecology-appg.org/ourwork/appg-agroecology-soil-inquiry/>
4. <http://www.agricology.co.uk/resources>