

A Foot on the Farming Ladder workshop

SA Conference, Custard Factory, Birmingham. 3rd Feb 2010

Chair: Huw Bowles

Panel/speakers:

Will Johnson - Recent Soil Association apprenticeship graduate

Jeremy Iles - Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

Jim Brown - Baker Brown Associates

HB opened discussion, relaying how all are aware of the many challenges that face those wanting to start up in conventional and organic agriculture. He suggested that in the organic sector the practice is more in its infancy and therefore at an advantage (does this create less barriers?). He also highlighted how in New Zealand the process from initial start-up to running a large scale farm can take occur over a relatively small period (i.e. 15 years) and he sees that this may also be possible in the U.K.

Will Johnson

Will highlighted that he has only been into organic growing over the passed 4 to 5 years following an earlier career in social work. His experience working at Coleshill Organics for 2 years as an apprentice was on a fairly small scale level, growing veg (inc. manually, with machines and in polytunnels) for the local community. Before carrying out 3 seasons at Coleshill, he worked as a WWOOFer around England and Scotland and he highlighted how these earlier experiences were a fantastic way to build experience and get foot through the door into a farming career.

He relayed how farming has been in the decline over the passed few decades and that, therefore, the average age of farmers has risen. The result of this means it is essential for young people to get into organic farming today.

The most fundamental lesson Will has learnt in his agricultural career to date is that organic farming is about skill sharing; organic methods are to be shared to look at ways of 'getting better' rather than competing with one another. For this reason, organic farming is efficient and sustainable and more attention should be put into encouraging and supporting the next generation of farmers. For Will, organic farming is more of a lifestyle than a job and he sees the fundamental issue of skill share as key to our future.

Will has recently been appointed as grower at Church Farm (Agrarian Renaissance), Ardeley in Herefordshire.

Jeremy Iles

Members of the FCFCG value the community and its ability to make an active and committed impact to their surrounding environment as well as building up a long-term supported network. In the past few years there has been a dramatic rise in allotment demand (with 2-3 year waiting lists in Bristol and up to 15 years in London!). Frustration lies in the fact that there is plenty of land available it is just in the wrong management.

There are numerous initiatives starting up that look at innovative ways around obtaining land (e.g. emergency trends such as growing in skips, on roofs, etc). Meanwhile lease is one method whereby those wanting to obtain land rent it from the landowner for an agreed period of time (often between 1-3yrs).

Another route is through a Community Land Bank where the land is actually bought by the community (whereas Landshare – carried out by Channel 4 – or allotments on National Trust sites, for example, are still owned by large organisations). The Community Land Bank provides a brokerage between land owners and the local community who are seeking land to start growing. The FCFCG came up with the idea in 2008 and was later given research funding from DCLG in conjunction with the Rebuilding Society Network to speak to allotment owners and local community groups. Project is currently in its second consultancy phase, looking into issues of management and governance whilst visiting rural communities, Local Authorities and private land owners in England (from Feb – Sept 2010). The result of this research seeks to act as a safety net for landowners and communities wanting to obtain land to come together successfully in the long-term.

ACTION

Jeremy asked group to email him with any ideas/thoughts, especially if they are looking for land or have land that they are interested in selling.

Jim Brown

In light of a disjointed government, Jim proposed to group a farming model for the 21st century that centralised social enterprise and community engagement over previous models (i.e. 19th century – where the overriding concern was towards family-owned land, power, status, ownership or 20th century – where emphasis was upon private investors, maximum returns, supermarkets and economies of scale). The business model suited to the 21st century needs to focus upon communities and shared stakeholders where the whole process is consumer focused (rather than profit focused).

He also stressed the need to re-address the idea of intensive land use. Although previously a term associated with conventional farming, Jim proposed that we should incorporate the idea into organic farming in terms of multiple land use strategies, to use the land more widely – not only for growing but for other associated activities (compost, water harvesting, social care, on-site processing, etc).

Benefits of a community-focused business model:

- 1) Reduces food chains by direct participation in the growing, packing, delivering, farm shop, box schemes, etc
- 2) Consumers understand about the premium price of food and how to grow
- 3) Local customers – become members or investors/stakeholders – which will improve security and capital (a long-term interest)
- 4) Community interests, ethics and values are shared. As a community investment, the community buy shares in the enterprise for the benefit of the community (the returns being of both social and environmental benefit)

Jim reminded group that such values were what The Co-operative was founded upon in early 20th century so we are just returning to this way of thinking (in a post-industrial society). JB is working on a 2 year Community Shares action programme with Co-Operatives UK and the Development Trusts Association. He stressed how this business model should not be exclusive to farming but apply also to communities owning shares in a football club, restaurant, etc. For more info see www.communityshares.org.uk

Current developments towards this business model (i.e. CSAs) focus upon sales and distribution to a great extent whereas there needs to be a shift more towards landownership; that is, community need to own land not just work with it.

Jim also stressed need for such models to be successful they need to move away from reliance on funding/charities for support and instead look towards transforming market economy through shares and investors by members/volunteers.

Discussion: Q &A

What barriers are there to those wanting to start up in organic farming?

Main barriers are lack of land, skills, financial support and access to market

Concern was expressed on finding the right model for own farm and how visits to different sites and seeing what does/doesn't work would be useful. Richard Snow highlighted MLFW study visits that will be taking place this year and urged group to get in touch to find out more.

Pete Richardson made observation that he's currently working towards a new way of approaching his box scheme in this light by looking to involve the local community more fully. He also highlighted his concern for the growing financial support young people face in wanting to develop a career in organic farming – i.e. SA Apprenticeship scheme is raising fees by £1000 and therefore need a lot of help from existing growers or private donors. There is also the issue of many wanting to join the scheme but not enough growers able to employ an apprentice for a 2 year period. One suggestion was that the scheme opened up to non-organic farms as well as organic to help the apprentices get into farming and be thinking more long-term about how to work together.

Myles (Garden Organic) outlined 'access to brand' issue – how local food and farming should be more prominent in the class room, not only to educate children about where their

food comes from but help raise the profile of a farming career for the next generation. JI agreed that this is an on going issue and the FCFCG need to work more in partnership with such organisations (i.e. set up community orchard round-table discussion).

The growth of CSAs and allotment waiting lists reflect how much is going on, it is just that they do not have a political voice at this stage so remain relatively unknown to the wider public, therefore we all need to work on developing resources to improve this communication.

What support is available for existing farms that are struggling?

Group also discussed the issue of those 'stepping off' the organic farming ladder (currently at 8 farmers/growers a week!). CSAs are a way for communities to help struggling farms but they take time to set up and develop – is there a way of helping farms more immediately (i.e. could SA provide a network/support over a 6 month period to allow farm time to find local community's support)?