

## Supporting the Next Generation of Farmers : Developing an Agroecology Training Network

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Whenever I meet a fellow farmer, be it the first time, or countless times – I feel an immediate curiosity, connection and respect. I feel a shared sense of excitement, and an implicit knowing, seldom expressed through words, that we both love what we do, and take a huge amount of passion in it. For me, it is in the welcoming of the growing season, marked by the arrival of the swallows over head in springtime and the chattering of the goldfinches in the hedgerows, that I feel I am truly home. It is in the morning sunlight that pierces through a carpet of clover playing in the breeze that I remember to take a moment of gratitude for being able to do what I do. It is in the power of seeds and the social stories they carry with them that the true magic of farming comes alive for me. And it is in the deep, dense smell of the soil on the first planting, or the arrival of the first lambs, that I feel a harmonious resonance with the earth and my place within it. This sense of knowing landscapes and their ecologies, the seasons and the soils beneath my feet has evolved as an experiential and embodied knowledge over my years in farming, and despite my efforts, was something I could never truly or fully learn from a book.

Reflecting on this to a friend and farmer one summer on a golden sunny evening as we rested our bodies and our minds after a long days work in the field, she shared with a beautiful and poignant saying *'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand'*. As we sat together, older generation and younger, she spoke with me about the power of embodied knowledge and the crucial importance of the wise elders of the farming community, the custodians of land based knowledge, to support and guide the next generation of farmers.

Barbara Damrosch who farms with her partner Eliot Coleman at Four Seasons Farm in Maine, USA also spoke about the importance of this intergenerational knowledge exchange in a book of letters that came out recently **Letters to a Young Farmer**, saying *'fewer people are born into farming now than they once were, and even if there is arable land in the family, it doesn't always come with parents or grandparents who can guide you. In that sense, we have a generation of orphan farmers'*.

As part of a growing movement of young and new entrant farmers (or the 'returning generation of farmers' as a Canadian farmer friend in La Via Campesina likes to call us) trying to find ways to go back to land based work and make a meaningful and dignified livelihood from it, these two encounters in the past year have stayed with me deeply, and a reminder that we are not alone. The path can so often seem long, lonely and uncertain and the obstacles immense. New entrants looking to make a start in farming are facing huge costs, low financial returns, social isolation and little in the way of policy support.

We know the grim facts and figures of the state of food and farming in the UK today and the multiple crises we are facing from climate breakdown to the highest levels of food insecurity the UK has experienced in decades, with an estimated over eight million people across Scotland, Wales and England living in food poverty and struggling to eat even one meal a day. We hear that over the past 20 years over 33 500 small scale farms have been either closed down or consolidated, the average age of a farmer is 58 years and over 30% of farmers are over 65. Less than 3% of farmers are under 35 years and there is little public support for anyone farming on less than 5 hectares or seeking to make a start in agriculture. There is a chronic lack of holistic agroecological programmes supporting and training new entrant farmers to get into the field of small scale, ecological farming and land based work - this widespread lack of opportunities and training effects both new entrants and established farmers looking to transition into more sustainable agroecological production techniques.

However despite this, and increasingly in response to it, there is this rising tide of new entrant farmers finding ways to transform our food systems, returning to both rural and urban land to produce good nutritious food on a small scale for their local communities. In the past few years, thousands of people are trying to make a start in farming, focusing on agroecological production and direct sales models. And grassroots organisations such as the Landworkers' Alliance, the Organic Growers Alliance, the Community Supported Agriculture Network, the Soil Association, The Biodynamic Agriculture College, The Community Food Growers Network, The Kindling Trust, Organiclea, Nourish Scotland, the Scottish Crofters Association and many others are working hard to facilitate, organise and support this growing movement to thrive against the odds to ensure the next generation of farmers get into farming.

In addition to the tireless campaigning for an Agriculture Bill that supports local food and agroecology, these grassroots organisations mentioned and many more have been working increasingly to address this education deficit by developing concrete and practical solutions. Within the memberships of our organisations we have an incredible pool of resources, knowledge and skills that land based workers are very keen and willing to share, offer and exchange; and we have many new entrant farmers in our memberships looking for support, training and mentoring. In order to develop a coherent learning pathway for prospective and new entrant farmers that offers a holistic agroecological pedagogy and embodied experiential learning processes various programmes and initiatives have emerged the last couple of years or are currently getting started include:

**(1) Farmer to Farmer exchange groups:** such as the Growers Group in South West England where farmers in the area meet once a month for an evening on each others farms. Hosts lead a farm tour and discussion on a certain seasonal topic ranging from propagation and seed saving, field scale growing, hand tools and mechanical weeding, to crop planning to bookkeeping. This model is very similar to the *campesino a campesino* model that has been used by La Via Campesina in Latin and Central America for years based on the traditions and experiences of popular education. A group in Scotland called 'Market Gardeners of Scotland' have also set up under a similar structure, and groups in Wales and various parts of England are also getting going. The Landworkers' Alliance is currently writing a handbook for guidelines on establishing and running a 'farmer-to-farmer' group.

**(2) Traineeship network:** farms in the South West England and South West Wales running various traineeship programmes are currently working to develop a traineeship network where trainers and trainees can be supported throughout the season. There are currently plans to develop training hubs, a best practice guidelines and a traineeship curriculum, and a programme of specialised training days shared out and delivered by the trainers available to all trainees in the network.

**(3) Mentoring programmes:** the average age of a farmer in the UK is almost 60 years old - and while this is often cited in a problematic way it also means there are loads of farmers in the UK with an incredible experience, wealth and history of farming! As more and more people try to get into the field of farming there is a higher demand for mentoring and intergenerational knowledge exchanges between farmers of all ages. These programmes pair up experienced farmers with new-entrant farmers in their first five years of establishing a business to offer guidance and support. Nourish Scotland has already been running a mentoring programme with great results for over three years now, the Community Supported Agriculture developed a program last year and both the Landworkers' Alliance and the Organic Growers Alliance are in the process of developing mentoring schemes for members to connect new entrant and more experienced farmers together both sectorally and regionally.

**(4) Farm start network:** has been established this year to bring together organisations that are working to support new entrants farmers by setting up 'incubator' sites where people can trial land based enterprises with a degree of support in accessing land, training, markets and equipment. This initiative is being developed in response to the needs and obstacles that many new entrant farmers face when trying to set up a new farm business and looking at what role existing and established farms with additional land and infrastructure can offer to support them.

**(5) Accredited on farm training:** There are hardly any recognised on farm accrediting training programs for new entrant small scale farmers in the UK. Initiatives such as Organiclea and Biodynamic Agriculture College have designed and developed accredited training schemes for on farm learning programmes. Other organisations and initiatives are currently also trying to look into how to develop accreditation for on farm training and develop a farmer led model for appropriate accredited training that can support the development of the agroecological sector.

**(6) Farm hacks, teaching days and skill shares:** A lot of tools, tech and machinery these days are no longer appropriate for small-scale farming methods, and it's harder and harder to find the right kind of farm kit. A Farm Hack is where a community of farmers and growers who are developing DIY appropriate tools and technology for small scale farming get together to share ideas, 'hacks', innovative designs and tools they have made and how. Several farm hacks have been run in the past few years and more are being organised this year across England, Scotland and Wales. Teaching days and skill shares are also being regularly organised covering a wide range of sectoral topics.

**(7) Seed sovereignty:** With more and more F1s and derogated non-organic seeds replacing open pollinated heritage seeds and an ever increasing decline in seed diversity and seed production knowledge The Gaia Foundation have been developing a seed sovereignty programme over the past two years in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. One of the projects main emphasis is to train farmers to become seed producers (a lost art in farming today) so as to ensure the resilience of our farming systems. To name a few Real Seeds in Wales along with Vital Seeds, Trill Farm and the Seed Co-operative in England have

been collaborating with the Gaia Foundation regional coordinators on the project and are continuing to host and deliver training for seed growers.

**(8) Political training, facilitation training and movement building:** In order to support this kind of grassroots organising to evolve, the Landworkers' Alliance is in the process of developing a 'facilitating training and movement building' course for farmers that are working to self organise collectively and develop farmer led education, training and exchange programmes as well as political organising at the local level.

It's an exciting time to be getting into farming as these self-organised and autonomous plethora of initiatives, programmes, exchanges and training opportunities are being developed and made more widely available. What is so empowering about this training network being developed is the rich biodiversity of knowledge and experience it embodies and the huge potential for transformative learning processes - which is one of the key principles of agroecology. In the Agroecology Declaration written by farmers from all over the world at the Nyeleni Forum in Mali in 2015, one of the key principles is 'knowledge sharing'. It advocates for 'horizontal exchanges and intergenerational exchanges between generations and across different traditions'. This philosophical and pedagogical approach to agroecological training is that rather than valuing and emphasizing top-down 'expert' knowledge, it puts the community of practitioners - farmers, growers and land based workers organising for a better food system - at its heart.

In agroecology there is a strong emphasis on *diálogo de saberes* (*wisdom dialogues* or *dialogue between ways of knowing*), and is one of the key organising principles of La Via Campesina in building alliances between farming networks and social movements across the world. It holds the biosphere of ways of knowing and learning approaches that peasants, indigenous communities and farmers have developed and passed down throughout history in a dialogue that promotes mutual understanding, collective learning and joint action rather than one approach dominating another.

As young and new entrant farmers we are all facing a huge struggle and a deeply unknown future ahead. We cannot build the alternative we desperately need alone. There are generations of our elders before us who have been and are still farming and we seek their friendship, council and wisdom. It is in the power of listening to each other's stories and sharing our lived experiences on the land that enables us to have far more than just solidarity with each other, it is a way of connecting that lays common foundations from which to take seriously the need to galvanise the energy and momentum that we all have into building alliances and a strong coordinated food and farming movement together over this coming year. It is in these grassroots networks we are all part of, our intergenerational farming communities, and our experiences and intimate knowledge of working that land that gives us strength and power in our actions, organising, learning and campaigning. It is through this embodied knowing that we strengthen our support and solidarity with each other as a movement that, in these times of political chaos and climate breakdown. It is through this that we are more than just sowing the seeds of resistance, but in our everyday actions already producing the solution we need - a food system based on community, solidarity, agroecology, food sovereignty, and environmental and social justice.

