

# **Agroecological Business**

## **Connecting civil society, SMEs and consumers to nature and the land**

### **Collaboration Report**

#### **on the Nexus Network-Awarded Networking Grant**

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### **Why Agroecological Business?**

Numerous disciplines and sectors now widely acknowledge that the global agri-food system is coming under increasing pressure and is unsustainable in the long-term. While experiencing pressure from reduced availability of resources, environmental change, and shifting diets, there is also an ever-increasing demand for higher levels of food production to feed the growing global population. It is now recognised that sustainable agri-food systems need to explicitly address

complexity and resilience to ensure not only food security and sustainability but also social equity at a scale that most matters to people: communities.

The discourse prevailing in policy, business and agricultural research is for a model of high-intensity farming systems managed by large corporations to produce affordable food. An alternative emerging discourse calls for an agricultural model of sustainable intensification: producing more food while ensuring the natural resource base that agriculture depends on is sustained. Agroecological techniques, incorporating more localised and equitable agri-food chains, present opportunities for producing outcomes which are environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable in the context of food-energy-water-environment nexus challenges.

Agroecology is a growing practice that considers the holistic relationship between all important biophysical, technical and socio-economic components of farming systems, aiming to sustain yields while minimising the negative environmental and socio-economic impacts of modern, large-scale farming techniques. Although agroecology has been practiced in developing countries for many years, there has been relatively little attention given to the potential of such alternatives in the Global North where high-intensity agricultural models continue to dominate.

While agroecology has been a policy discourse as well as community and social movement practice for many years, it rarely has been approached from the perspective of business, conceived in a broad sense. This focus on business is crucial to expand existing nexus conceptions to include economic, social and political dimensions as well as ensure agroecological practices are sustainable in the long-term.

## **Activities Undertaken**

This project brought together a network of researchers, agroecological producers, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and other experts working in the field of agroecological business practices in the UK. This network developed resources which will be publicly available online in order to continue to expand this network and further strengthen the evidence base for agroecological business models as a viable sustainable alternative to mainstream agriculture.

In order to develop the network of agroecological businesses and relevant stakeholders in the UK, the following primary activities were undertaken during this project:

1. Workshops held at the Centre of Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University and Hamilton House, Bristol.
2. Network building during the National Food Sovereignty Gathering 2015 in Hebden Bridge.
3. Meetings with owners, managers, farmers and volunteers at a range of agroecological businesses throughout the UK. These included: Five Acres Farm (Warwickshire), Bennison Farm (Essex), Apricot Centre (Essex & Devon), Brighton Permaculture Trust (Brighton), Incredible Edible Todmorden (Yorkshire) and Ash & Elm Horticulture (Powys).
4. Meeting with Riverside Market Organic CSA; Steve Garrett, founder of Riverside Market Organic is centrally involved in the sustainable food sector around Cardiff and shared his wealth of knowledge about ongoing activities. One of our researchers will now join the board of Food Cardiff, which facilitates further expansion of the network and extends the impact of our expertise.
5. Production of a comprehensive database of agroecological businesses and initiatives in the UK, which is in the process of being made publicly available.
6. A thorough literature review of the development of agroecology in Latin America and insights reflected in discourse and practice in the UK and other countries.
7. Mini-workshop with academics and visiting scholars at City University London to discuss and compare agroecology and nexus questions between the UK and Brazil; follow-up discussions with Dr Sergio Schneider (UFRGS, Brazil, currently on sabbatical at City University) regarding nexus-related research in the southern region of Brazil.
8. Two meetings with Guy Watson, CEO of Riverford Organic, Devon. Guy Watson has contributed to the research proposal for the Nexus Network Research Partnerships Grant, for which Riverford Organic will be a case study. Riverford Organic are the largest agroecological business in the UK. The company already maintains extensive data of their customer base, which we potentially have access to.
9. Online discussion with agroecological farmers in Northern Ghana and stakeholders from the supply chain and support networks working with them.
10. PhD workshop on sustainability and the food system at the Apricot Centre in Essex, involving a number of agroecology focused academics (Dr Sergio Schneider from Brazil gave a keynote address) as well as non-academic stakeholders, such as practitioners at the Apricot Centre and Bennison Farm.
11. Co-facilitation of a session and stakeholder engagement activities at the Oxford Real Farming Conference 2016.
12. Development of a co-produced research proposal submitted to the Nexus Network Research Partnerships Grant call, in order to expand the nexus dimensions and investigate the

sustainability of nexus criteria in agroecological business models in the UK, India, Ghana, and Brazil.

## **Reflections on the Networking Process**

The extent of trans-disciplinarity amongst the academic team was of great benefit, as it allowed us to approach the agroecology field through different disciplinary lenses. However, it was sometimes a challenge too, as different concepts, terms, languages, and understandings are used among the multiple disciplines involved in this project. We hence felt that meeting amongst the academic research team first was vital to develop a shared understanding and language.

The term ‘business’ was understood in different ways by academic and practitioner partners in the context of agroecological models of sustainable agri-food systems. For some ‘business’ is a catch-all term that includes all economic activities, including very small-scale livelihood building; for others ‘business’ is more geared towards medium to large scale for-profit activities. Through detailed examination of the concepts and terminology used by relevant stakeholders, the team developed a definition of ‘business’ for use in this project and the subsequent research proposal. Within the context of this project the understanding of an agroecological ‘business’ was very inclusive to incorporate small-scale community-based initiatives to larger scale profit-making enterprises. This dimension of size within sustainable models of agri-food systems is a key consideration and research agenda to be explored further in our proposed research partnership grant project.

Throughout our discussions it also became apparent that there was a need to move beyond certain framings of ‘alternative’ agricultural practices, given their association with socially exclusive forms that marginalise not only those with less economic capital, but those who feel culturally uncomfortable in the spaces in which such alternative foods come to be distributed and sold. By focusing on business, as opposed to moral ideas about what is good or better, it seems that we might move towards agroecological solutions that are more culturally acceptable to a wider cross-section of society. That is, how can agroecological business come to serve diverse communities in ways that do not alienate consumers who are less comfortable with, for instance, the contemporary incarnation of the farmers market or co-operative box scheme? Engaging with this question addresses a core concern for those seeking to mainstream agroecological practices by reflecting on the absence of engagement in such initiatives by working class consumers. As agroecological methods of food production have the potential to deliver healthy and sustainable food for all it remains to be mindful of the ways in

which such business models develop in ways that confine themselves to the same audience of consumers.

During preliminary discussion among the academic researchers involved in this networking project, the team's understanding of an agroecological business was defined. However, on beginning the project activities it quickly became apparent that there is a disconnect between the terminology used by agroecology practitioners and the discourse in academia and policy. This presented challenges in identifying and engaging non-academic stakeholders for the purposes of the project.

To overcome these challenges, two steps were taken, which were later pivotal in informing the development of the subsequent research proposal. Firstly, for inclusion in the database the parameters of what constitutes an agroecological business were expanded. The database initially intended to map all businesses which self-identified as working with agroecological practices. However, this yielded very few results because, although 'agroecology' is commonly used in related research and policy, practitioners in the UK rarely self-identify with the term. The process identified that there are many businesses and initiatives in the UK which do work with the principles of agroecology but self-identify using terms such as 'permaculture', 'biodynamic', 'organic', and 'Community Supported Agriculture'. On expanding the parameters of initiatives included in the database, the opportunities for connecting with relevant stakeholders increased rapidly.

Secondly, the thorough literature review began by reviewing the history of agroecology in Latin America rather than solely focusing on the UK as initially planned. This is because the history of the agroecological movement and discourse is richest in Latin America, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. Also, the contested social and political dimensions associated with agroecology are mostly visible in Latin America. This allowed for reflection on the disconnection between practitioners, academics and policymakers in the UK, taking insights from the lessons that have emerged over time in the context of Latin America. Through incorporating additional stakeholders into the developing network, the significance of the social, political and economic dimensions of agroecological models became apparent. This resulted in the subsequent research proposal adopting an understanding of an 'expanded nexus' which perceives the biophysical food, water, energy, and environment dimensions as equally important as social, political and economic dimensions.

This definition of, and need for, an 'expanded nexus' is one of the key insights and learning points coming directly out of this collaboration project. By bringing together researchers from a range of

different academic disciplines (including geosciences, geography, environmental sciences, political economy, business and management studies, etc) who have rich experiences of working closely with agroecological practitioners, communities, businesses and policymakers, we have been able to critically reflect on the existing nexus discourse, identifying the need to expand its conception.

Following this initial phase of the project, during which the parameters of the working understanding of agroecological business were expanded, the networking activities were successful in connecting relevant stakeholders and agroecological businesses in the UK. However, due to the dispersed nature of individuals and businesses engaged with agroecological practices throughout the UK, it was challenging to bring stakeholders together for the workshops held in Coventry and Bristol. As such, the workshop was attended by academics and researchers working in the field of agroecology but practitioners from the supply chain were not able to attend. A decision was subsequently made to organise a range of other stakeholder meetings as well as visiting them directly, in order to build close working relations with them. This also required the reallocation of expenses, as the originally anticipated cost structure no longer proved workable. Instead of spending most provided funding on large networking events, we hired two research assistants who helped us with all of the above listed activities, including contacting non-academic stakeholders directly, researching the literature review and building the database.

The production of the database of agroecological businesses in the UK was based on online resources and secondary data. This generated opportunities for remote interaction with relevant stakeholders and informed engagement and network building during the National Food Sovereignty Gathering and Oxford Real Farming Conference. Engagement with stakeholders, including producers and volunteers, was more practical, and thus effective, when conducted remotely via online communication as well as during the above named events. Through developing connections between civil society, producers, SMEs and other stakeholders during these events, the research team were able to capitalise on an existing platform for discussion about models of agroecology and alternative farming systems. Ultimately, using online communication to arrange stakeholder engagement and networking during the conference was successful because the individuals concerned did not need to take additional time away from their farms and businesses.

The mini-workshop at City University, PhD workshop at the Apricot Centre and follow-up discussions with Dr Sergio Schneider informed a critical comparison of agroecological evolution, challenges and prospects in the UK and Brazil. Ongoing experiences of alternative commercialisation

and cooperatives were particularly considered. The results of these activities were particularly relevant for the preparation of a new grant application aimed to expand on nexus-related questions, particularly within an international context.

## **Connecting with Stakeholders**

From the starting point of a team of academic researchers, this project built a network through different routes of engagement, incorporating a variety of non-academic stakeholders related to agroecological business models. To optimise the use of experience and engagement with this field of study, the academic team connected with their existing networks and contacts to begin building the network. This created a discourse among the growing network and facilitated wider engagement during the project activities, creating momentum towards involvement among stakeholders. This collaboration project has provided the opportunity for non-academic stakeholders to engage in a specific, focused project towards positive and productive outcomes.

The full range of networking activities undertaken in this project have included engagement with civil society and consumers, producers and volunteer growers, business owners and managers, shareholders, activists, suppliers and retailers, non-governmental organisations, and related associations and networks, as well as other academics and researchers working in the field of agroecological business. Contact with these organisations was made on a one-to-one basis but also during events, such as the National Food Sovereignty Gathering and the Oxford Real Farming Conference.

While businesses were often contacted on an individual basis, the research team have also utilised existing contacts in a range of relevant groups, movements, networks and associations. These included:

- Land Workers Alliance
- Soil Association
- Community Supported Agriculture Network
- Ecological Land Co-operative
- Food Sovereignty Movement
- Permaculture Association
- Slow Food UK
- Biodynamic Association

- La Via Campesina

In hindsight, it is clear that producers and small and medium-sized businesses have many demands on their time. This is particularly the case during the peak agricultural growing months during late-summer and autumn. On reflection, this project could have benefitted from being longer in duration to accommodate the need for flexibility of project activities around the priorities of all stakeholders involved.

Following this, a pertinent lesson is the benefit of arranging project activities around occasions which agroecological businesses are already engaged with. It was felt that the stakeholder engagement during the National Food Sovereignty Gathering and the Oxford Real Farming Conference was beneficial for the development of the database and helped to strengthen relationships with non-academic collaborators involved in the preparation of the subsequent research proposal. If awarded funding under the Nexus Network Research Partnership Grants scheme, the team will build on the lessons learned from this project by more effectively utilising the spaces created for discourse surrounding related events which stakeholders will otherwise be attending. Timing stakeholder networking and research activities to coincide with relevant events also creates opportunities to continue to expand the network which has formed during the period of this project.

There has been much interest in this project and in furthering activities going forward. The trans-disciplinary nature of the project has not deterred people from becoming involved in the networking activities and the development of the subsequent research proposal. This interest in the project has been evident from a range of stakeholders including academic researchers, agroecological businesses, and civil society and activists. Despite having a range of disciplinary backgrounds, those who have become involved in the network have not faced significant barriers to working across disciplines because of an apparent shared interest in enhancing understanding and furthering the development of agroecological business models as a sustainable alternative to mainstream, high-intensity agriculture.

## **Outputs**

- A research proposal submitted to the Nexus Network Research Partnership Grants for international study of agroecological business models using an ‘expanded nexus’ to explore innovative co-production through social, political and economic dimensions.

- A comprehensive database of all identifiable agroecological businesses and initiatives in the UK. This database includes a map of all the agroecological businesses and is being made available to the public via an online platform ([www.agroecology-research.net](http://www.agroecology-research.net)), searchable by keyword, location, or type of business.
- A thorough literature review of agroecology in Latin America and insights emerging from that region which are reflected in the academic and policy discourse in the UK and other countries worldwide.
- A trans-disciplinary network of academics and stakeholders working in the field of agroecology, which will continue to meet, share experience, define research and communication priorities. The network will use the online platform ([www.agroecology-research.net](http://www.agroecology-research.net)) to not only expand the mapping of agroecological businesses in the UK and internationally but also to communicate with each other and develop a sense of shared identity.

Once fully established, the online platform available at [www.agroecology-research.net](http://www.agroecology-research.net) will provide access to the database of all identified businesses and initiatives engaged with agroecological models of sustainable agri-food systems in the UK. New initiatives or stakeholders will be able to add their details to the database for other users. The platform will also provide a map of the UK indicating the location of each of the initiatives in the database and access to the literature review undertaken for this project, as well as links to other relevant resources. A forum for discussion of the expanded nexus dimensions of agroecological business models has been created in order to maintain interaction among the network of stakeholders developed within this project. Learning from the experience of successfully connecting with agroecological businesses via online communication, we hope that the online platform will continue to serve as a productive tool for maintaining existing links and expanding the network further.

Although ambitious in scope, the research team feel that the objectives of the research networking project have been achieved with useful outputs on which to build. Furthermore, non-academic stakeholders have readily engaged with the project and the collaborative development of the subsequent research proposal submitted to the call for the Nexus Network Research Partnerships Grant. The activities undertaken and the lasting outputs of this project have provided a crucial foundation for the process of co-designing the planned research project.

## **The Research Proposal Development Process**

Within the academic team there were long discussions around the ‘nexus’ discourse, and, based on our interaction with stakeholders and our own academic experiences and insights, we felt it is much needed to expand the definition of the ‘nexus’ to include social, political and economic dimensions. The resource dimensions of food, energy, water and environment are continually contested within a dynamic social field.

The diversity of social, political and economic framings of nexus issues creates a plurality of discourses with at times contrasting objectives. Notably, there are contestations over political meaning and the economic allocation and use of resources. Furthermore, the political contestations within the agroecology discourse in the UK and globally raise social and economic issues of equality and justice, reflected in the international food sovereignty movement. This is pertinent because agroecology tends to speak to small and medium sized businesses, while large-scale agri-businesses follow different agricultural practices and discourses that tend to emphasise food security through cost and availability. Consequently, the stakeholders involved in this project felt it was vital to expand the parameters of the food-energy-water-environment nexus to incorporate the diverse and dynamic social, political and economic dimensions associated with agroecological business models.

The parameters of the ‘expanded nexus’ developed through this project for the research proposal incorporates a range of environmental and social science disciplines. As such, each of the team members, both academic and non-academic partners, were able to contribute productively in the process of outlining the proposal and research agenda.

During the development of the research proposal, contributors reflected on the existing evaluations of sustainable farming approaches. The full range of potential stakeholders within agroecological business models includes those working upstream and downstream from the farms and primary production. However, this feature of agroecology has been largely overlooked in existing studies despite influencing nexus interactions. To this end, it was considered to be important to maintain an inclusive understanding of what constitutes an ‘agroecological business’ to incorporate stakeholders throughout the agroecological value chain, from input suppliers to retailers and consumers.

The non-academic partners involved in the process of developing the research proposal have readily engaged and have been keen to be involved. Numerous agroecological businesses in the UK came forward to act as case studies in the proposed research. Furthermore, when approached by the research

team, there was no hesitation from the case studies identified in India, Ghana and Brazil in expressing interest to collaborate on the project. Although academic members of the research team were able meet in person to discuss the planning of the proposal, much communication with other stakeholders and partners was done via online media in order to facilitate collaboration with diverse individuals from disparate locations.

Achieving ‘buy-in’ from non-academic stakeholders for this project, preparation of the research proposal, and ongoing activities has been relatively straight-forward. This is largely because we have, individually, worked with non-academic stakeholders for a long time, and the team has shared the approach of seeing research as a collaborative and participatory process. Selecting the academic team members was hence an important step towards forming a coherent team and approach.

Throughout this project we have found that it was necessary to be reflexive and flexible around the needs and availability of the different stakeholders involved. Due to particular time constraints on the availability of non-academic stakeholders, and specifically in relation to the peak farming season, the length of the project did not accommodate organising a networking event specifically for this project. To overcome this we made use of existing events at which non-academic stakeholders would be present. However, in future projects which must incorporate the needs of multiple stakeholders, a longer timeframe would be beneficial to allow for flexibility within the project schedule.

Two features of this project were particularly beneficial for enabling trans-disciplinary working across academic and non-academic stakeholders. Firstly, starting the project with a small group allowed space to determine the understandings, use of terminology, and objectives of the group members. This was then taken to other stakeholders as the network expanded. Secondly, the use of online media for communication was particularly beneficial for collaborating with stakeholders from multiple sectors and disciplines. The use of online platforms for communication facilitated the process of co-production of the research proposal and made it possible to ensure the resulting proposal met the needs and interested of all partners. The capacity to incorporate these two points into this project facilitated the trans-disciplinary collaboration among stakeholders. The team intend to take these learning points moving forward in ongoing networking activities with diverse and dynamic agroecological businesses.