



EcoNEXUS



Letter to Ministers and Research Councils.

At the Food Ethics Council session at ORFC "Reclaiming Research for Real Food and Farming" it was agreed that we would, as a first step, 'write a letter' calling for changes in the food and farming research agenda. This letter has been finalised through a process coordinated by FEC with several of those who spoke or intervened at the session. It has been sent, requesting a meeting, to Ministers in DEFRA, BEIS and DFID as well as key people in BBSRC and UKRI.

February 2019

We are writing to seek a meeting about the food and farming research agenda. Our recent discussions have highlighted the growing need for a transformation of our food and farming research - its overarching aims, priority areas and the way research agendas get decided and funded. We are keen to work with you to make that shift happen.

At the tenth Oxford Real Farming Conference in January 2019, which was attended by over 1,000 participants, people from a wide range of interested organisations met to discuss what we need from UK food and farming research [details [here](#)]. The discussion included innovative UK farmers who practise agroecology (including, among others, organic, permaculture and biodynamic farmers), researchers, industry representatives, charities, not-for-profits and other citizens, several of whom are signatories to this letter. The meeting agreed that there is an urgent need for a shift towards research that delivers biodiverse, agroecological (as defined in the 2015 [Mali Declaration](#)) systems that produce nutritious, diverse foods, for localised food systems, directly benefitting people, crops, livestock and the biosphere. The Eat-Lancet Commission has since echoed this with a call for "strategies to refocus agriculture from producing high volumes of crops to producing varied nutrient-rich crops."

There was a broad consensus that current priorities of publicly funded UK research on food and agriculture need to change radically if our current nutritional, environmental, animal welfare and economic challenges are to be met. There are many research challenges surrounding the optimisation and adoption of agroecological farming practices that are not being addressed by the current focus of the Transforming Food Production strand of the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund on precision agriculture. Furthermore, supporting different approaches that put farmers and citizens at the centre of research would enable UK agricultural research to reach its full potential and deliver real impact. The UK's [Innovative Farmers](#) programme is putting farmers in the driving seat of innovation that is relevant at the field level, with more than 80 'field labs' linking farmers with researchers.

Farmers should be at the centre of the research, not merely treated as its targets and passive recipients, and a cross-sector collaborative approach is the best way to achieve this. The Horizon 2020 EU funding stream provides an example of how this can be done. It includes examples that can help to inform what works and doesn't work when delivering high quality applied research. Alongside ensuring continued access to this funding, there is huge potential for UKRI to develop similar schemes for varying scales and challenges. At a Europe-wide level, networks such as the European Agroecology Knowledge Exchange Network offer incredible opportunities for peasant-to-peasant (or farmer-to-farmer) knowledge exchange.

This would require a reduction in public funding for genomics and hi-tech-driven top-down research that are primarily geared to service industrial, export and academic needs. For example, many question the relevance of the proposed field trials of GM and genome-edited crops to UK agriculture and the public interest. There were strongly expressed views that the current focus of publicly-funded research - on new technologies, including biotechnology and genomics, precision agriculture, robots, sensors, etc. that feed big data rather than people - seems to be determined, in the main, by what would benefit global agri-food corporations.

Instead what is needed is a reboot of the research system built on excellent existing practices for good food and farming at many different scales from smallholdings to larger farms. These include participatory research on agroecology, as defined by the [International Forum for Agroecology](#), in all its scientific, technical and social dimensions. Such approaches will require more biodiverse seeds, adapted locally. Any research into plant (and animal) genetic resources should not be for the benefit of corporations, but for the public good, and these resources and data, including genetic data, should by no means be patented, privatised or commodified. This will enhance the food system on many levels, including collaborative enterprise and organic whole farm approaches, and can deliver sustainable, healthy changes in production and consumption patterns. We need a new research agenda for the public good that will deliver benefits directly valued by the public. The new agenda should also provide government and its regulatory bodies with the tools for the effective legal control of technological developments, applying the Precautionary Principle to research, development and release of new technologies and products.

In sum, the meeting agreed that it is crucial that the type of research funded by the public purse is fit for 'real food and farming' i.e. to improve agroecology, food sovereignty and economic democracy. This is important not only for food and farming research in the UK, but also for research projects funded by the UK's Department for International Development, which has given less than [5% of its agriculture budget](#) to projects supporting agroecology in the global South.

We are writing to seek a meeting with yourself and colleagues from other ministries that influence, or are impacted by, food and farming research. The purpose will be to discuss how the framing of research strategies and their funding priorities could be changed to be more responsive to what was described in the ORFC session. We also want to discuss how the mechanisms of funding research, including the functioning of UKRI, or a new council focused exclusively on food and farming research, could be opened up to more democratic decision making. For both of these changes we advocate the inclusion of, and decisive involvement by, those who share and contribute to the agroecological vision of food and farming outlined above.

The matter is urgent as participants in the meeting repeatedly stated. A thorough overhaul of the research agenda and the way in which government provides funds is needed. As highlighted in the Food Ethics Council eMagazine '[For Whom?: questioning the food and farming research agenda](#)', nothing less than the future of food and farming is at stake.

Yours sincerely

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