

ORFC 2020

'Gearing up for agroecology: transforming publicly-funded research and innovation for the public good?'

Adam Payne, LWA

I'm a farmer and I also work for the Landworkers Alliance including some of our projects and campaigns. I was asked to give a few succinct thoughts on some of the issues that are holding back the transformations that we need; some of the key actors we need to bring into play; and highlight some processes that we have to focus on. To start with, it's important, I think, to recognize the success and power that the agroecology movement has built so far – that's something that we can often forget about. We have to hold that in our thinking when we're talking strategy. It's easy to forget when, in the context of the recent election results, we'll doubtless face a much more challenging environment politically than we could have hoped for.

We have to think strategically and carefully about how we engage with the new political environment. As has been mentioned already, last year Michael Gove was here, upstairs in the Town Hall, speaking some quite soft words. But he was also down at the Oxford Farming Conference saying that they're investing in a widespread rollout of artificial intelligence, synthetic meats, gene editing, you name it - the fourth agricultural revolution that they envisage is based on technology deregulation and the private sector.

What they're doing, and what we have to be wise to, is that they're also co-opting social movement language, co-opting agroecology and framing everything in positive language. So our approach has to meet their game. We have to recognize that the high tech language, the high tech solutions they're proposing are not compatible with agroecology. They directly undermine the processes that agroecological farmers need to survive. They directly undermine the agricultural resources, the genetics, the seeds, the breeds that are the basis of our production system. And they lead to a research agenda that is providing for different needs.

There is very little, if anything, that we can get for our agricultural system from research orientated towards high tech production. And so we have to think here about scaling up our resistance, about organizing more effectively, but sharing resources more effectively and how we are engaging with the opportunities that there are still within that.

We need to emphasise the importance of public research as a principle. One of the real risks of the deregulation agenda is going to be that research is entirely a commercial object. We see that at the moment. As much as possible of R&D is being done by organizations that are developing products without farmers. The very basis of agroecological systems is building farmers' knowledge of how to work with the ecosystem that they're embedded in. We don't need research that's about developing products; we need research about how we interact with the ecology of our farms.

Moving on to some of the key actors that should be involved in what should be farmer-led research. I think that point is very important to maintain. We also have to be clear that when we talk about farmer-led, we're also talking about a union, a social movement backing this.

It's interesting to see presentations from DEFRA, from the productivity team, for example, which say that farmland research is going to be at the forefront. And they will easily find farmers who will advocate for the kind of research that they're willing to put money into. We have to wise up to that and make sure that we putting social movements and unions at the heart of this research. And that's how we're engaging with public research; it's also how we're working with research together with our organizations. The elements of our movement have to be more coherent. We have to share resources better. We have to support one another. We have to recognize that the farmers' organizations/unions will also need support to be able to engage systematically and coherently in shaping that research agenda.

And we also have to make sure that social movements and the international exchange of ideas are at the heart of agroecology. I think that's something which we risk losing if we are not mindful of this. But we have very clear opportunities to engage. We have to keep international organizations like La Via Campesina at the heart of what we're doing here and recognize that through international exchange is the only way that's going to really help us take agroecology research to the next level.

Finally, a few thoughts on key processes. I think it's easy to overestimate the power of our opponents and underestimate our own power and the ability we have to make changes. We mustn't forget that we do have allies within government and allies within civil society. We have a lot of power as a social movement and we're building that power year on year. At the moment, we're gaining strength. We mustn't forget that we have that we have to make use of this power.

Some of the key processes that are relevant include the agriculture bill and the [Dimbleby] national food strategy process. These are a pretty fundamental piece of legislation and an important process into which we have to bring an agroecological approach because, otherwise, they will create a stronger legislative base in support of what we don't want. We've also got to work with the DEFRA teams and recognize that the teams in DEFRA are often more amenable to some of the things we're proposing than their political payers. There's scope within that for us to be doing research, working with them to change the research agenda.

A third challenging process, coming back to the theme of resistance, are the free trade deals that will doubtless be negotiated in the coming years. These could massively threaten to weaken our movement and our resource base. We have to fight those effectively and coherently.

The fourth process is the movement space. We're doing a lot to build spaces where we can interact. We can build collective power. We can shape our directions through conferences like this, through marches, like the farming, food and climate justice marches that the Landworkers Alliance have been organizing. Through all kinds of interactions we can build on our own relationships, build in our own power; we can build our own resources; but we have to scale these up as well.

Thank you.