

CHRISTOPHER JONES

AN UNSAFE DISTANCE

*An examination of relations between
Governments and Farmers*

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FOREWORD

by John Wibberley¹

The urgent issues of food supply, global climate change and sustainability, highlight the need for action arising from proper relationships between farmers and government. In the UK, these have reached an all-time low in the recent decade, while in so-called 'developing' countries attention to agriculture and agricultural extension has become neglected.² Climate change is a fact of our times. Agriculture is a contributor to it and must live with the consequences. This calls for both adaptation and mitigation policies and practices. Here is an immediate incentive for improvements to be achieved in farmer-government relations, for the sake of intergenerational sustainability.

Climate change is a fact of our times. Agriculture is a contributor to it and must live with the consequences.

The adjustments required within farming, though of a different order of magnitude, are analogous to those agreed to be required four decades ago, when conservation on farms came into focus.³ Indeed, wartime conditions in the 1940s required changes in approach and this prompted new activities on farms that went well beyond those of short-term profit motivation.

So from this springboard of climate change urgency, this account reviews the historic changes in the relationship between farmers and government and their ensuing practical consequences. It describes these changes and then considers the possible reasons for them, before going on to suggest factors likely to contribute to better and more fruitful relations.

¹ Professor E. John Wibberley, PhD, FRAGS serves in agriculture & extension in the UK & overseas.

² *Why no thought for Food?* Report of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Agriculture, January 2010

³ *Farming with Wildlife: a study in compromise*, Silsoe, 1970.

This review relates to wider work on climate change and agriculture. The consensus of researchers on climate change internationally is that human activity has become a prime contributor to global warming.⁴ Major causes are increases in carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere. Agriculture is both a cause of some of this, and a means of mitigating it.

Farmers are both victims and potential beneficiaries. They are victims in terms of more extreme weather patterns and the land degradation that results. They are potential beneficiaries in terms of yield increases in some instances and the possibility of becoming providers of various renewable energy supplying opportunities, and ecosystem services.

What this means in practice is that farming will have to change to varying degrees in order to play its part in addressing this global challenge. This requires a thriving two-way relationship between farmers and government in a context of appropriate public policies.

As sponsors of this project, the Agriculture and Theology Project (ATP) believes there are theological insights that will add to an understanding and appreciation of the principles and practice involved in meeting these challenges. In its widest sense theology is a broad, interdisciplinary subject that explores the meaning of life as well as the texts and traditions of various religious groups. It is a valuable avenue from which to think about values and beliefs and the reasons for holding these views.^{5 6}

The November 2008 Agricultural Christian Fellowship conference “*Cherishing the Earth: the challenge of farming, food and climate change*” noted that in adapting to and minimising climate change,

Farming will have to change to varying degrees in order to play its part in addressing this global challenge. This requires a thriving two-way relationship between farmers and government in a context of appropriate public policies

4 Houghton, J. (2009); IPCC (2007).

5 Wibberley, E.J.(2008) Global Climate Change: Agricultural Implications & Theological Reflections. *Rural Theology* 6 (2), 75-89.

6 Wibberley, E.J.(2008) Global Climate Change: Agricultural Implications & Theological Reflections. *Rural Theology* 6 (2), 75-89.

governments have a key role in leading, co-ordinating and encouraging responses and in laying down vital basic rules. This is as true in relation to farming as in other spheres. However, it is farmers who will have to devise ways of applying these rules and principles and provide feedback on their suitability. Partnership between governments and farmers was seen as the way forward: partnership of listening, thinking and doing, not just at top national level, but reaching right down to the grass roots.

Also in 2008 there emerged the report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, the fruit of a remarkable worldwide evidence-based exercise, involving experts from *international agencies, governments, commercial bodies and civil society*. One of the key findings was: “*Targeting small scale agricultural systems by forging public and private partnerships, increased public research and extension investment helps realise existing opportunities.*”⁷ Agricultural extension work is seen as crucial to the co-operation of governments and farmers. Experience shows that catalysing farmer interaction and group relationships is central to achieving sustainable extension.⁸

For a thoughtful Christian, none of this is too surprising, because relationships are the central reality of life and leaders are to serve rather than “*lord it over*” people (Mark 10. 42).

7 IAASTD “Global Summary for decision makers” key finding 12 p. 6

8 See Wibberley, E.J. (2008) Farmer-Interactive Extension for Improved Management through FARMS (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Groups: an International Perspective. 12 pp. In *Global Entrepreneurship: the Role of International Agricultural and Extension Education*. AIAEE 24th Annual Conference, Earth University, Costa Rica (March 2008). www.aiaee.org

Executive Summary

This booklet set out the nature of the challenges in food supply, environment and climate now facing agriculture. It highlights the important role of relations, at all levels, between governments and farmers and explores some Christian perceptions which might inform how such relationships can be advanced and improved.

The problems experienced through decline in these relationships over the last twenty or thirty years in the UK and in England, in particular, is described. A situation, characterised by extensive and productive grass root interaction, mutual trust and exchange of ideas, advice and experience, has been replaced by one in which almost all grass root interaction relates to regulation, inspection or eligibility for the Single Farm Payment. There is extensive “buy out” from government aims together with mistrust, and little opportunity for feedback from farm experience to government. The reasons for this are discussed. These include an impoverished conception of agricultural extension work, a simple failure to recognise the importance of relationships where transactions must occur, the increasing role of regulation, the frequent exhaustion of farmers and the fragmented structure of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and its agencies. These bodies seem to be designed for a one-way flow of information and control. It is also suggested that government’s conceptual framework around the significance, role and nature of agriculture underlay these problems.

The discussion moves on to look at the wider world, with examples from Egypt, where government farmer relations seem to closely parallel those in England, and from Malawi, where the instruments for productive relations still existed but were apt to be dormant. The role of the Department for International Development (DFID) vis a vis this subject is considered and it is suggested that this is coloured by many of the underlying assumptions that have handicapped Defra – assumptions probably affecting government as a whole and the cultural ambience within which it thinks.

Some points are then made about bringing about change – about its importance and potential, and about the constraints and possibilities on both sides, with positive examples. The discussion moves on to the role of third parties, including a description of a rekindling of extension activity in Malawi and discussion of the insights and roles of Christian bodies.

Finally there is a review of some hopeful signs of a refreshed approach in the UK and the wider world, which together with the importance of these relationships might provide an opportunity for change.

Partnership Withers

Some recent Experience in the United Kingdom

In UK terms, what prospect is there for such workable partnership between government and farmers? This discussion has to start from the real situation and not from where we would like to be or from where we wishfully think we are.

For England there are a number of possible perspectives from which to view the Government's relations with farmers, in terms of both the systems and agencies put in place, and of the actual practice. Whilst referring to other sources we will draw primarily from two. The first arises from one of nine Land Management Initiatives, established and implemented by the Countryside Agency and others from 1999 to 2004⁹. The aim was to demonstrate how England's land management and farming systems could respond to the changing demands on agriculture in sustainable ways. One of these, the Norfolk Arable Land Management Initiative (NALMI), worked with 31 arable and mixed farmers of all ages. In gauging the responses of this group of farmers to initiatives aimed at converting them to more sustainable farming methods, the researchers investigated their relationships with government personnel from the early 1970s through to 2005. In recent years, devolution has meant that in Scotland, and in some ways in Wales, the pattern of official relations with farmers has diverged from that in England. Alongside reference to the NALMI study, therefore, we will incorporate some parallel Scottish experience.

⁹ Hall, J. & Pretty, J. (2008a) Then and Now: Norfolk Farmers' Changing Relationships and Linkages with Government Agencies During Transformations in Land Management. *Journal of Farm Management*, 13 (6), pp. 393-418.

Hall, J. & Pretty, J. (2008b) 'Buy-In' and 'Buy-Out': Linking Social Capital and the Transition to more Sustainable Land Management. *Paper presented to the Rural Futures Conference: Dreams, Dilemmas and Dangers*. The University of Plymouth, UK, 1-4 April, 2008.

Our second principal source is the experience of Farm Crisis Network (FCN). In addition to supporting the farming community through periods of challenge and personal crisis, this voluntary organisation has toiled in the interface between farmers and government since 2001. Whereas the NALMI study primarily reflected the experience of arable and mixed farmers, FCN's experience has been predominantly with livestock farmers.

The NALMI Findings

Norfolk Farmers Changing Relationships with Government¹⁰.

These reports make sober reading. Using ethnographic and grounded-theory approaches¹¹ over seven years, the NALMI research revealed how farmers' relationships with government agencies have changed substantially over the last 40-50 years. Relationships once described as close, friendly and trusting were now characterised by physical and social distance between farmers and government agencies, professional disrespect for the service farmers received, increasingly divergent agendas and distrust. Whereas in the past, government support had been influential in substantially changing farmers' practices in land management, now a general decline in trust led to defensive relationships, which caused a delay in farmers' transition to more sustainable land management. This was particularly marked among those farmers considered as policy targets, for example, polluting farmers. Key to this change was a decline in the social networks that once existed between farmers and staff working for, what farmers called 'The Ministry'.

10 Appleby, 2004. Norfolk Arable Land Management Initiative (NALMI). *Final Project Report June 1999 – May 2004*. Report compiled and written by Melinda Appleby based on work by John Terry and Jilly Hall. November 2004.

11 De Ulzurrun, L.M.D. (2002) Associational Membership and Social Capital in Comparative Perspective: A Note of the Problems of Measurement. *Politics and Society*, 30 (3), pp.497-523.

Svendsen, G.L.H. (2006) Studying Social Capital *in situ*: A Qualitative Approach. *Theory and Society*, 35 (1), pp.39-70.

Hall, E. J. B. (2008) The Role of Social Capital in Farmers' Transitions Towards More Sustainable Land Management. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Essex. Thesis available on request from <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.495572>

There are telling examples of personal recall which illustrate the relationship with government agency staff in the past:

*"He sat down in that chair you are sitting on now, in this office, for one and a half hours and at the end of it there was a six year plan for the farm"*¹².

"He was like a folk hero amongst the farmers"

"You used to look forward to them coming".

The NALMI study reports that up to the 1980s there had been open, honest and trusting relationships and continuity of contact with known and knowledgeable staff able to adapt their message to individual farms and farmers. Most of the farmers felt that during the 1970s and 1980s they were effectively helped in a transition on their farms. This took them towards higher productivity and intensification.

In hindsight this was congenial change – farmers liked producing more and at an individual level it safeguarded income though, of course, at a collective level it probably reduced it in the long-term by leading to overall surplus. Nonetheless much was achieved *"sometimes against their farming instincts"*.

The study describes processes in which farmers and government agents jointly found ways forward. It would have been interesting to know how myriads of such discussions and processes were filtered upwards into government thinking.

A parallel Scottish view of this period comes from the Rev Ivor Macdonald describing his time as an agricultural advisor of the Scottish Agricultural Colleges.

"My own experience relates to agricultural extension work with the Scottish Agricultural College. When I joined the advisory service there was an expectation that advisors would integrate with the farming"

12 Hall, E. J. B. (2008) The Role of Social Capital in Farmers' Transitions Towards More Sustainable Land Management. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Essex. Thesis available on request from <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.495572>

Hall, J. & Pretty, J. (2008a) Then and Now: Norfolk Farmers' Changing Relationships and Linkages with Government Agencies During Transformations in Land Management. *Journal of Farm Management*, 13 (6), pp. 393-418.

community. Younger advisers participated at different levels in the Young Farmers Movement, there were weekly visits to the auction mart and we were encouraged to make regular visits to farms at suitable times even when these visits were not requested. A network of farmer discussion groups was established which had a social as well as an informative character. The strong identification with the farming community was a huge resource, which enabled the uptake of advice.

Nearly 2000 of the farmers' comments about their relationship with government agencies were analysed. 87% of these were negative whereas of the comments about the earlier period, 97% were positive.

The good relations that existed throughout the 1970s and 1980s were largely a result of clarity of purpose. The vision for agriculture was one of expansion. There was recognition that food security was important and that to achieve that it was necessary for farms to expand production. Looking back it is possible to see that the advocacy of oil-based inputs to the exclusion of more sustainable approaches was a mistake. There were advocates of a more balanced, integrated form of agriculture we would have done well to have heeded and incorporated within the mix of agricultural advice".

The NALMI study moves on to describe a "distancing" process, ending in a situation of distrust and disrespect. Nearly 2000 of the farmers' comments about their relationship with government agencies were analysed. 87% of these were negative whereas of the comments about the earlier period, 97% were positive.

Many of the farmers interviewed traced the start of this process to the privatisation of the farm advisory service, ADAS. Ivor Macdonald also sees the introduction of privatisation as beginning the erosion of social relationships between the advisory service and farmers. *"It was inevitable that fee charging, detailed time sheets and the focus on revenue earning aspects of land use would undermine the trust built up over the years. A price was put on everything apart from some of those aspects that had made the advisory service most effective, namely social contact, understanding and advocacy."*

Others in Norfolk pointed to a kind of withdrawal of contact from government offices as they moved from District to County to Region

and later of course to national call centres. As the physical distance increased, casual 'dropping in' virtually ceased and administrative staff became less aware of locally distinctive farming practices and terminology. Physical distance, therefore, tended to increase social distance.

Another focus of comment among the NALMI farmers was the way in which government staff became more preoccupied with regulation and checking up and less with partnership and advice. Communication was now all one-way – more than that there was *"Dread related to difficult tasks contained within the letters and reports"*. Henry, an arable farmer, was typical in this respect *"piles and piles of books arrive every day and there is no time to read them. Huge volumes of material come through, – never have time to read it. It just makes me feel guilty"*. Many farmers' comments indicated professional disrespect *"targeted primarily at unprofessional and incompetent administration (65%) but also at inexperience in dealing with farmers and part technical knowledge of farming"*. However these farmers felt that no mercy was shown to their mistakes. Some of this is also echoed in Scotland. There has been a similar alienation between farmers and crofters and the government bodies responsible for delivering grant aid. These government bodies are more and more conceived of as policing the system so as to identify abuse and minimise payments rather than maximise support. *"Even the name change from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland to the Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate is telling."* (Ivor MacDonald)

The authors of the NALMI reports conclude that the relationship between NALMI farmers and government agency staff in the period 1999 to 2004 has become less trusting and was characterised by distrust and 'Buy-Out' to government policies. 'Buy-Out' was defined as *"farmers' deeply internalised hostility to the government's governance of agricultural and rural policies. "Buy-Out" results from (and subsequently increases) physical, social and emotional distance between the farmer and*

The relationship between NALMI farmers and government agency staff in the period 1999 to 2004 has become less trusting

government agencies. It is characterised by professional disrespect for the standards of service received and, as a consequence, results in agendas for the farm that diverge from government policy".¹³ 'Buy-Out' was one of the most significant findings of the NALMI research. These findings raise the issue of whether or not the NALMI area was unique – or whether the conclusions are valid for other areas of England.

The experience of Farm Crisis Network

Much of the experience and attitudes described in the NALMI reports relate to arable farmers in East Anglia and to the period up to 2005. By contrast the experience of the Farm Crisis Network has been predominantly, but not exclusively, with livestock farmers, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In terms of the interface between government and farmers it runs from 2000 until the present time. FCN was set up as a Christian support network consisting of volunteers, knowledgeable about farming, to support or 'walk with' farming families in difficulty. Volunteers are not advisors, but they are listeners, gentle questioners and sometimes advocates. FCN works co-operatively with the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institute (RABI) and the ARC Addington Fund, each performing functions complementary to those of the other two. From 2000 onwards, FCN has been drawn inexorably into the interface between Government and Farmers.

In 2000, there was an epidemic of swine fever in East Anglia. This was FCN's first experience of the mix of effects and side effects of these epidemics. At the heart of the issue is the agony (or potential agony) of abruptly losing livestock, which may have been reared for generations within the same holding, together with the overwhelming impact of restrictions on livestock movement. The inability to move livestock involves cutting off the farm's income stream, whilst steadily increasing the size and or numbers of livestock being fed. The Government policy was to provide compensation for the value of stock compulsorily slaughtered, but no official help with the losses

¹³ Hall and Pretty, 2008:409

and expense induced by movement bans. There were complaints of incompetent slaughtering, of pig carcasses being left on farms, the inexperience with pigs of the extra government vets drafted in, and of a failure to understand the impact of movement bans. There was a feeling that people out of touch with the local realities directed the Government activity from London. When farmers were called to a meeting with Government officials it was unclear whether the two parties would long remain in the same room. This occasion marked FCN's baptism in the widening gap between government and farmers. Everyone did stay in the room! However the situation was tense and relations, by now as we have seen, poor in East Anglia were further threatened.

The epidemic of foot and mouth disease in 2001 brought farmers and government together in a galloping calamity. Over four million animals were slaughtered in the struggle to eradicate the disease, and another two and a half million for welfare reasons. Government spent £1.4 billion on compensation for these. Farmers are estimated to have lost £2.4 billion and the tourist industry £3 billion. Recording became impossible but I calculated that, at times, FCN must have been receiving, through its Helpline and various local contacts, fifty or sixty calls an hour.

General relations started badly as no ban was imposed on the movement of animals for a week after the outbreak started, although FMD was clearly already present in Northumbria and Essex. After that the epidemic stayed ahead of the control measures for months, while statements were made about it coming under control. Most of the problems stemmed from things that had already happened.

*"In the 1980s, government had culled the public extension service, leaving the UK as one of the few countries in the world without a system of knowledge development and transfer connecting up farmers, scientists and policy makers. This reduced connectedness and linking of social capital would contribute to the havoc in the FMD crisis."*¹⁴

¹⁴ Jules Pretty in "The social and cultural impact of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK in 2001", Manchester Univ. Press, p.247

At times, FCN must have been receiving, through its Helpline and various local contacts, fifty or sixty calls an hour.

Being on the farm at the time, one of the most shocking things – as soon as we told the vet – we were no longer in control of our own house, business, environment

This meant that there was little capacity for local, negotiated application of the control measures. A rigidly centralised process determined everything. Thus there was a continual rush of cases where people were trapped between the rules and disaster: for example people whose sheep were lambing in mud but who were unable to take them over a road to buildings. Even when an official was contactable they often lacked the discretion to make decisions. In fact one Ministry official caught in such a situation ended by ringing FCN! Vets, MAFF staff, soldiers and farmers struggled in the chaos of carcasses and fears – sometimes heroically. All this made a profound impact on all of them. Much has been written but I will leave it with two quotations:-

“Being on the farm at the time, one of the most shocking things – as soon as we told the vet – we were no longer in control of our own house, business, environment.

Second class citizens. People in white suits coming in. Talking about you – not to you

“How’s the farmer? Is he all right?”

“Yes I think so.”

“It’s still like that. Freedom taken away. You feel pretty strongly about it at first – animals taken away and slaughtered. You are controlled.”

“My conversation with farmers, both during FMD and in my own farming life, constantly reveals a deep lack of faith in the levels of knowledge and experience of experts and policy makers. This amount of cynicism breeds disengagement...”

“Government and its offices occupy a paper land, created by stepping away from the job itself. Real land is where the farmer lives and works.”¹⁵

Mistakes made by the British Cattle Movement Service (BCMS) figure in some of the NALMI comments. This body was charged with maintaining a database of all cattle and their movements. In 2002,

¹⁵ Pamela Sandford in “The social and cultural impact of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK in 2001”, Manchester Univ. Press, p.38

with no prior consultation with farmers’ organisations, the newly formed Rural Payments Agency (RPA) started using the BCMS’ database to check farmers’ application for cattle subsidies. The trouble was that the database was not always correct. Most farmers were unaware of this and many had no means of checking up on the information it held. The seriousness of this was magnified by the fact that the penalties the EU applies to errors in applications have a sort of inbuilt multiplier. So if a farmer gets say 5% of it wrong, he loses say 10% of the claim, if 10% wrong he can lose say 40% – that sort of thing. Thus very quickly he can lose a large chunk of income¹⁶. This type of self-multiplying penalty was to be a huge factor in later disasters. In this case, it meant that if the BCMS database did not include a small number of cattle, subsidy would be lost on a much larger number, whether or not the applicant actually had the right number of animals. In addition, of course, such punitive penalties implied fraud, on the part of the farmer, which was deeply resented by honest farmers. Despite, intervention by a Minister easing the situation, it turned out to be a harbinger of things to come.

In 2004 and 2005 there was widespread trouble over farm maps. In 1992 all farmers had to submit an Ordnance Survey map of their farm to the Ministry of Agriculture. In 2004 these were updated and computerised. The Rural Payment Agency undertook a mapping exercise, sending out draft maps and inviting farmers to either confirm their accuracy or submit corrections. For many this started an absurd process, in which they returned the map with the errors corrected, only to receive another map two or three months later, often with a new error. This went on for many months. In the case of the present author it went to five rounds over more than

From then on almost everything that could go wrong did – including the most improbable.

¹⁶ The particular rules about cattle subsidy are now obsolete and the exact details are beyond recall. However, the principle is still used in respect of, for example, declarations of land areas: an error under 3% simply means a payment reduction equal to the error. Beyond 3% the payment withheld is equal to double the value of the error. Above 20% and all payment is withheld. RPA Single Payment Scheme Handbook 2009 p 52-3.

a year. Often the merest glance at the new offerings alongside the corrected original would have shown that they were wrong: so why were they posted? This conveyed an impression of incompetence and indifference on the part of the RPA. In addition it further delayed, for many, their involvement in the Government's new "Entry Level Stewardship Scheme". It also sowed doubt and uncertainty in farmers' minds as the introduction of the "Single Farm Payment" approached.

This major change in EU policy got off to a good start in 2004 with a process designed to produce an agreed "Information Statement" detailing each farm's subsidy history, on which part of the new single payment would be based. From then on almost everything that could go wrong did – including the most improbable. Over the next two years the majority of farmers experienced long unpredictable delays affecting a large slice of their income, great difficulty in eliciting guidance or information and huge delays in correspondence. For many matters were worse.

It is important to remember that for several years before 2005 and on through this period farm incomes were generally low. According to Defra's figures, the total of all farm incomes was, in several years, less than the overall subsidy payment, so, in the average, no subsidy meant no net farm income – nothing to live on and nothing for any investment.¹⁷

Letters began to accumulate unanswered – often for months.

Applications for this new single farm payment scheme were due in May 2005. In the run up, the RPA closed access to its regional centres, which people had been able to telephone or visit for guidance. Instead there was an RPA national help line, which quickly became jammed with incoming calls.¹⁸ Then as more inexperienced staff were drafted in, the answerers lacked the knowledge to field the enquiries. Letters began to accumulate unanswered – often for

¹⁷ DEFRA annual farming figures, DEFRA website. For a fuller treatment of this see Firm Briefing 231 in collaboration with FCN – The Current Economic State of British Agriculture – 2005. http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/projects/rusource_briefings/index.html

¹⁸ In addition to awareness of farmers' widespread experience of being unable to get through, some members of FCN visited the call centre both to help the staff to recognise the callers' difficulties and to support the staff who were in an impossible situation.

months, by which time more letters had been sent and the answer to the original query no longer met the need – or worse was mistaken by the recipient as a reply to another later query. Right up to the last minute Defra was making rulings on details of the policy – sometimes after people affected had sent in their application. As this went on, it became clear that not only did no one person deal consistently with each farm, but that none of the staff had access to the whole application form never mind the information statement.

There then followed substantial delays in payment. Against a published start date in December 2005 and target of 96% payment by the end of March 2006, only 15% had been paid by that date. It was only in May that the greater part was paid. It was not just that payment was delayed, but also that there was no way of knowing for how long. One member of FCN spent hours on a farm with bailiffs, because although there was an RPA statement of the amount due, no amount of telephoning and beseeching would produce an idea of when the farm would be paid. In the end the bailiffs withdrew, just because of FCN's persistence.

In October 2006, the National Audit Office reported that farmers who had not been paid by February or March *"and who would otherwise have experienced a cash flow difficulty, took out, or extended, financial loans, sold crops or livestock earlier than anticipated or, in some cases delayed payments to their suppliers. For many farmers the direct effect of late payment was to force them to postpone purchases or investments. Whilst the range of actions taken made it difficult to calculate the cost accurately, drawing on the advice we received from the British Bankers' Association, we estimate that the delays could have cost farmers between £18 million and £22.5 million in interest and arrangement fees on additional bank loans and increased short term borrowing on overdrafts. This figure does not include any estimate for interest foregone by farmers whose bank accounts are, or would have been, in credit, or any knock-on effect on the wider agricultural industry. A number of suppliers' representatives and other associations in the*

For many farmers the direct effect of late payment was to force them to postpone purchases or investments.

¹⁹ National Audit Office

farming industry considered that their businesses had been affected by delays in settling their accounts and a decline in other business activities, such as the trade in farm machinery.”¹⁹

Within this wide picture FCN were made aware of examples of acute distress, like the man who could not pay for his fathers funeral, the one whose water was cut off and many more. From it all there emerged a group of mostly elderly or otherwise vulnerable people who made mistakes in their 2005 single payment application form and were denied all or part of their 2005 payment, or worse the basic entitlement. FCN wrote to the National Audit Office in August 2007: *“There remains a group of farmers who have still not received 2005 payment because of the factors arising out of the original confusion. The least fortunate seem to be those who fell or were nudged into the ‘appeals’ system.” At the second stage, when a panel not consisting solely of RPA staff review the decision and where the farmer can be present, the success rate is well below 10% – not really a credible figure for any appeal process. In practice success only seems to come with new evidence, in other words the stage one decision is never wrong. People can and do lose the whole of their 2005 claim and more besides, because of mistakes in the filling in of the form. One root of this seems to be a misreading of an EU document on ‘obvious error’. The document strikes us as eminently sensible and possessing the flexibility to allow just and sensible outcome but it is being turned into a straitjacket, which prevents them.*

We believe it is very important that a legacy of the 2005 troubles should not be the crushing of vulnerable families. Apart from the damage inflicted on them, there would be the bad effect on the morale of the best staff and the apprehension and suspicion engendered in a much wider group of farmers. The RPA organisation is on the turn but these injustices must be put right for the sake of the present and the future and the reform of procedures to ensure that such injustices do not occur again must be completed”.

Some indication of the seriousness of these events comes from FCN caseload statistics. April, May and June are normally quiet months for

new cases. In 2005, as the application process developed the number of new cases rose to 170% of the average for 2003 and 2004. In Spring 2006 when the effects of the late or absent payments were felt, numbers of new cases were again up to 70% above the average for Spring 2003 and 2004. As workloads rise, it becomes increasingly difficult for a network of volunteers to fully record all its activity. Help line calls, which are the easiest to monitor, showed sharper increases. In the second half of 2003 “red tape” featured in 20% of recorded cases, in 2005 the figure was 37% and in 2006 46%, whilst finance hovered throughout at a third to a half.

No sooner had things returned to near normal in May 2007, than, with the arrival of floods, followed by avian flu, foot and mouth and blue tongue diseases, the case load continued to rise and rise until by October help line calls were running at more than ten times the rate for October 2003 or 2004.

Though the number of farms directly affected by slaughter of their livestock even with three diseases on the march was much less than in 2001, movement restrictions were widespread. All the agony of halted income and many mouths to feed burgeoned rapidly, exacerbated by the usual strain of complying with a steady spate of rules and restrictions. The actual handling of the diseases was perhaps, overall, not damaging to farmer government relations. The real blow to relationships this time was that the foot and mouth outbreak emanated from a government owned or controlled research centre at Weybridge in Surrey. In spite of this, there was little government contribution towards meeting consequential losses, especially in England.

The case of the flooding which affected probably 42,000 hectares, causing losses worth between eleven and twenty-four million pounds²⁰, in July 2007, was different, but it was in a way a missed opportunity. There are still within the ranks of Defra agencies, very capable staff with experience from the days of active extension work. These could

By October help line calls were running at more than ten times the rate for October 2003 or 2004.

have been deployed to help farmers to work out the best way of dealing with the aftermath of the floods. What, for example, do you do if, as in one FCN case, your farm is covered with a layer of human sewage? FCN volunteers did not encounter government personnel when trying to support farmers in such situations.

Finally we come to the case of bovine TB. Whatever the rights or wrongs of this, the stark fact is that a major and costly animal disease, which from the 1950s onwards farmers and government had worked together patiently and persistently to eradicate, is now repossessing the land slowly but surely. Again, but now in slow motion, there is the pain of losing animals, linked, for some, with the constriction of income, all enveloped in a feeling that it is just getting worse and worse. This time there is also the sheer cost of all the testing. In its report "Stress and Loss", Farm Crisis Network has done a summary of the impact of bovine TB on farm families²¹. These figures show how the time demand

95% of the farmers interviewed did not think that current TB control measures would contribute to the eradication of TB.

for testing can come to dominate farm life, as some of the comments from affected farmers given later in the report show. This is costly, as are the reduction of milk and meat yields caused by disturbance of the cattle and the impact on the timeliness of other farm operations. This FCN report makes it clear that there are often communication problems between Government and farmers and dispute about the valuation of slaughtered animals. However, the overwhelming cause of friction is that 95% of the farmers interviewed did not think that current TB control measures would contribute to the eradication of TB. (In Wales the figure was a little lower – perhaps because changes in policy were recently announced). This is a stark example of the "buyout" discerned by the NALMI report in 2005.

All this is really a tragic story of relations full of trust, mutual confidence and promise withering from neglect and withdrawal and then, in England, being ruptured by a succession of damaging events.

²¹ FCN: Stress and Loss 2009

Some Reasons Why Were there underlying factors at work?

Collapse of "extension" work

We have examined the distancing process and the withdrawal from local contact. Beginning in the 1980s the then Ministry of Agriculture began to withdraw from the local level, to the County level, to the Regional level and then finally the RPA, which until 2005 was the part of Government most involved in Farmers lives, withdrew to its call centre. In parallel the State Veterinary Service was also reduced in reach and strength with subsequent very serious consequences. Then the relationship with the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) changed to advice paid for. *"After privatisation, the nature of staff employed by ADAS changed. Francis (one of the NALMI farmers) recalls, "the best went first. Gradually the personnel changed"*. Finally advice became a commodity the Government provided free or for a fee through private bodies commissioned to deliver the package. Then it faded away altogether. At the same time in other connections, continuity of staffing and contact was lost in many instances.

In all of this there seems to have been a failure to understand the nature and value of good extension work. It seems to have been seen simply as making packets of information and advice available to businesses which ought to pay the private sector for it, not as a channel through which Government could influence the way the nation's land and landscape is managed and its food produced, and to receive back ideas, adaptations, challenges and grass roots understanding. At the same time a new policing relationship grew up.

Denial of relationship

Early on it was remarked that “relationships are the central reality of life”. In Christian terms it cannot be otherwise. When Jesus was asked, “which is the greatest commandment of the law?” the response was unequivocal. “You must love the Lord thy God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind...”. The second (commandment) resembles it, “and your neighbour as yourself”²².

In response to the question “Who is my neighbour?” came the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37). This makes clear that in Jesus’ sight “neighbour” means anyone a person comes up against – especially if they need help.

Much more could be said but that would be to labour the point. Everyday life echoes it; it is our relationships that often bring us the greatest pain or joy, discontent or content. Even at the simplest level a brief transaction can rise to being a flash of light. And yet so often the human aspects of transactions are squeezed out. The more complex and demanding the transaction the more disabling that can be.

This goes far wider than government and farmers: it infects many aspects of UK life, but it surely lies underneath the deteriorating relations that we have been examining. It is illustrated and symbolised by the RPA’s “task based” system of handling Single Farm Payment claims. This denied RPA staff access to a farmer’s whole claim and situation. The process was not primarily about unrelated tasks but about people and farms. The more complicated the case, the more destructive this denial became, frustrating to farmers and RPA staff alike. Many RPA staff intuitively grasped what was happening and tried to rise above it.

Role of Regulation

It was always going to be difficult to maintain a positive feel in a relationship as the number of rules and regulations increased and the

²² Luke 10 v 25 – Jerusalem Bible

consequent inspections became more numerous and the implications of these for farmers’ incomes grew. The FCN report, “Twenty five regulations per acre”²³ makes clear, almost by accident, that for most farmers, forms, regulations and inspections constitute the whole of their relationship with the Government and its agents. No one really enjoys one sided and disempowering relationships, but farmers perhaps less than most. Their stock in trade includes independence and the use of their own skill and judgement. This is a difficult issue for the Government when many of the rules are made elsewhere, but it is widely suspected of “copper-plating” such rules.

As the partnership relationship faded the rules based relationship, which had replaced it, was poisoned by the staggering confusion of 2005 and 2006.²⁴

Administrative Arrangements

Farmers “felt experience” of Defra has often been of a shifting landscape of quangoid bodies carrying out its functions, without the parent body always seeming to accept responsibility for the outcomes. With this has come a sense that no one can “get at” or influence the direction of travel – not even the devolved body itself. It also seems that advice; regulations and inspections about different aspects of farming were from different directions with no overall integrated approach. There is the further difficulty of reconciling all of this with the tenor of the Government’s political voice on the subject of farming.

Closer acquaintance with some of these bodies has suggested that, at times, their role and modus operandi is minutely prescribed from the Centre, whilst paradoxically the Centre emphasizes their devolved nature. Lurking inside it all there seems to be the strange notion that policy making and policy implementation should be carried out separately. It is hard to see how grassroots response and experience

²³ Twenty five regulations per acre, FCN 2007. A study of farmers’ experience of inspections.

²⁴ See report, Dec 2009, of parliamentary ombudsman “Cold Comfort” – the administration of the 2005 single payment scheme.

can influence policy in such a context. How does feedback occur? This is exacerbated by an apparent shortage of any farm experience at senior and policy making level. It must be very difficult for Defra staff to be caught in the flow of this one-way tide.

Exhaustion of Farmers

From the mid 90s there was a prolonged income squeeze on farming, which meant fewer people doing the work, tiredness, and wives and other family members working off the farm – people not at their best. When calamities came some farming people began to be capable of believing anything about Government – however preposterous – for example that the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic was deliberately planned and brought about to put an end to UK farming.

Policy Issues

In Ivor MacDonald’s perception, based on his experience as an extension worker and later as a rural Presbyterian minister, “There has been the loss of a clarity of vision. Food security ceased to be seen as a vital objective and agriculture’s unique contribution to the social fabric of the nation is no longer appreciated. In some ways this has come about as a result of the advocacy of one understanding of efficiency namely, the replacement of people with oil based inputs of chemicals, fertilizer and machinery. This has had the result of reducing the numbers involved in farming to the extent that farmers seem remote to most of the population. The population has been less willing to support an industry which projects itself as comprising “efficient” industrialised agribusinesses. Had we paid more attention to the social and sustainable aspects of agriculture in the 1980s the situation might have been different... This has led to confusion between the continuing drive towards efficiency (measured in terms of output per labour unit) and the new imperative of land and wildlife conservation. There is a distrust of government officials who seem to advocate a policy that is not integrated”.

Food security ceased to be seen as a vital objective and agriculture’s unique contribution to the social fabric of the nation is no longer appreciated.

At the same time in England, features of policy and Government attitude fuelled suspicion and even despair. The Milk Marketing Board and its successor were deemed to be anti competitive, but supermarket-buying power was accepted. People in farming, cattle and even the long-term future of wildlife, seemed to matter less than a particular view of badgers. Illegal meat imports did not really seem to matter even if they did carry disease. Food could always be bought elsewhere and agriculture was not important. Meanwhile the pound rose more and more as farm prices fell to the extent that general public attitudes seemed to mirror that of the Government; Farming people felt demoralised and undervalued.

The pound rose more and more as farm prices fell to the extent that general public attitudes seemed to mirror that of the Government

Underlying much of this has been a prevailing worldview, which characterises much of political and economic thinking in the United Kingdom, and England in particular. A particular school of ‘free market’ economics, combined with a cultural obsession with trade as a self evident good in all circumstances has created an ideology verging at times on idolatry²⁵, in which diverse, sustainable family based farming cannot thrive wherever it is. Under cover of its advocacy, huge concentrations of power have grown up in the world of food and farming to the extent that it is hard honestly to use the word ‘market’.

The highpoint of the UK allegiance to the above was reached in 2005 in a document called “*A vision for the Common Agriculture Policy*”, written amid discussions in Europe, related to an upcoming “health check” on the Common Agriculture Policy. This document may no longer entirely represent government thinking but it has a role in explaining the state of government farmer relations.

Written with confidence and brio, it was based on certain assumptions:

²⁵ I well remember a ministry of agriculture official telling a UK food group delegation that “globalisation is the guiding light”. See ref 30 p37 above

1) That agriculture should be treated the same as any other sector of the economy. In its submission to the House of Commons Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, which was working on the "Vision", the Agricultural Christian Fellowship said "As well as providing food in the present, agriculture should nurture the potential for future production – soil, plant and animal varieties, biodiversity and knowledge. It controls most of the land surface and hence water catchment, landscape and wildlife habitats and through these things an important part of local identity. It has familial, social and cultural significance. We are not sure that any sector of the economy should be treated just like every other, but in the case of farming it is an assumption pregnant with trouble".²⁶

2) That there is a simple relationship between level of production and product price, between farm-gate price and shop price, with no recognition of the importance of biological or climatic factors, or of the role of power in trading relations in food. Coupled with this is a belief that competitive processes are always benign, with no awareness that in agriculture a single minded drive for low production costs can lead to abuse of people, animals or land.

3) That food will always be available on the "world market" so there is no food security issue in European agricultural policy.

All of this was buttressed with explanations and comments on EU policy prior to the major reform, which took place two years earlier as though nothing had changed, and also a cavalier use of statistics. In restrained language the House of Commons Food and Rural Affairs Committee said: "*We believe there are several instances where some clarification would have enabled a more balanced representation of the statistics, where information could have been nuanced to alert the reader to the fact that some data predated the most recent reforms, and where it would have been helpful to have noted the assumptions upon which the analysis was based.*"

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The Government's lack of analysis to underpin its proposals was both a practical and intellectual failing

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²⁶ House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, The UK Government's "Vision for the Common Agricultural Policy" Ev page 216

The Government's lack of analysis to underpin its proposals was both a practical and intellectual failing".²⁷

The way this was done, indicated a view that agriculture in Britain, or even in Europe as a whole, was not important.

If governments believe that global markets will always deliver food security, that farming is the same as any other economic activity, that all that might be needed by way of public policy is a little incentive for farmers to provide public goods, and that if farm prices were lower the environment would be safer, then relationships with farmers will be apt to be difficult. However, in these terms, it will not matter very much and there will certainly be no need for farm relationships and extension work and therefore these have withered.

²⁷ H of C Vol 1 page 14

CHAPTER 3

A brief look at the Wider World

The Wider World *"We small scale farmers are absent from the insides of the heads of our politicians"* Kenyan lady farmer.

Egypt

An article, in the Guardian Weekly of 18 September 2009 (p. 25-27), about the Nile Delta, depicts the threat of rising sea levels combined with diminished supplies of fresh water on food supply. It also describes how gulfs of suspicion and misunderstanding work against any response by Government and farmers.

The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change pinpointed the Nile Delta as one of the areas most likely to be damaged by a rise in sea level. The 16,000 sq kms of land fed by the Nile's branches produces 60% of Egypt's food supply and is home to two thirds of the population. The Mediterranean coastline lies at or near sea level. At the same time the amount of fresh water reaching the area and flushing the salt out of the land is shrinking thanks to increased use and pollution upstream.

"The scale of the crisis has infected discussion of climate change with a toxic combination of cynicism and fatalism at every level. There are senior environmental officials who do not believe climate change is real; others are convinced the problem is so great that intervention is useless..." Much expert opinion in Cairo views the "Fellahin" who farm this land as too uneducated to change. The Guardian (p. 27) reports that as the rich brown soil greyed out in recent years with a barren salt encrustation on the surface, the farmers have been all too aware of the causes. ²⁸

²⁸ Guardian Weekly

“Farmers here feel abandoned by the state; there are regular dismissive references to the “New Age”, a euphemism for the much-hated regime of President Hosni Mubarak, whose neoliberal reform programmes and widespread corruption scandals have provoked a wave of popular discontent across the country. This disconnect between the state and its people has led to distrust of government scientists ...”

The inability to see farmers as partners with their own potential is also visible in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa.

Malawi ²⁹

Dan Taylor writes

Farmer support in Africa is characterised by poorly resourced ministries who view technology transfer to farmers of packages of external inputs as the mechanism through which agricultural development can best be achieved. Beset by budgetary constraints, lack of mobility, staff attrition and information bottlenecks and deficits, most agricultural ministries are unable to offer farmers the advice they sorely need.

The fundamental relationship between Ministry of Agriculture and individual farmer in Africa remains unchanged and is based on standard assumptions of knowledge and ignorance that date back to colonial times. Its framework is the technology transfer model; its basic premise is that knowledge flows from ministry to farmer in a single direction. Research trials are undertaken at one or more ‘centre of excellence’ (the research farm) with its ‘expert’ personnel and associated infrastructure, whereupon the results are conveyed via subject-matter specialists (in a specific branch of agriculture such as agronomy) to agricultural extension personnel (or generalists). In this model, the interface is that of extensionist and farmer. The former imparts knowledge and information, the latter passively receives it. However the underlying assumption is straightforward: as official representatives bearing the approved message of government, they are the recognised custodians

²⁹ This section is written by Dr Dan Taylor – see note at the beginning.

of agricultural truths; the corollary, therefore, is that farmers are bastions of ignorance, who must be taught how to farm correctly. (This is obviously a simplification of the facts because farmers might resist, ignore or only partially adopt a recommendation if it is not fit for purpose – sometimes at their peril.)

The transfer of information, its technology and techniques of usage is not just about knowledge but also about power. Resource poor farmers, in particular, forming the base of this ‘pyramid of power’ have always been the most powerless, the most vulnerable and the least able to resist the ‘message’ when it appears inappropriate.

However, it is disingenuous to assume that agricultural personnel are malicious in their intentions. They themselves are isolated and lack information, they are not informed about more sustainable agricultural options that could be adopted and may in fact be confused by conflicting official policy recommendations. So in practice, they resort to the same old technologies and techniques.

The transfer of information, its technology and techniques of usage is not just about knowledge but also about power.

Department for International Development

At about the same time as the vision for the Common Agricultural Policy was being produced under the name of Defra, the Department for International Development also produced a statement about the role of Agriculture – *“Growth and poverty reduction: the role of agriculture”* (DFID December 2005). This is a less pugnacious and more thorough work concerned to show that it is not possible to work to relieve poverty in poorer countries whilst ignoring Agriculture. It marks the beginning of a new approach to the subject after a period of which the Director of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation said *“The UK government and DFID were part of the neglect of agriculture and the food issues in the 1990s and we should not forget that this was a political mistake which is haunting many nations today”*.³⁰

³⁰ Why No Thought for Food? A UK Parliamentary Inquiry into Global Food Security, January 2010 page 5

DFID, of course, is not directly responsible for government farm policy anywhere, but its deployment of aid and advice is influential. The document recognises the importance of civil society and farmer voices in determining policy.

“Interest groups can play an important role in shaping agricultural developments in favour of poor people by enabling poor people to express their views and influence policy processes in a meaningful way.

In Latin America, there has been a long tradition of peasant mobilisation by popular movements to influence change. Another example is in Senegal, where the Committee National de Concertation des Ruraux brings together several producer federations. It has become one of the main participants in discussions between government, international aid donors and producers on agriculture-related issues like land tenure.

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A growing agricultural sector needs to be supported by a number of basic functions, including an effective legal and regulatory system.

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On a smaller scale in Sumatra, traditional village governance institutions have re-emerged in the past five years to deal with agricultural tenure issues and to represent local concerns in external discussions.”³¹

There is recognition of the importance of extension work

“A growing agricultural sector needs to be supported by a number of basic functions, including an effective legal and regulatory system. It also needs effective research and information (extension) services that meet the demands of users.

In many developing countries these functions are often missing or operating sporadically and with limited coverage.”³² However these themes are little developed. The good in this paper is hemmed in by the same overall body of assumptions about global markets as those in the Vision for the Common Agriculture Policy, coupled with a similar use of outdated information on existing EU policy.

Every time the text seems to be approaching the subject of corporate power, it veers away and the only imports mentioned as

31 DFID Growth and poverty reduction: the role of agriculture p14

32 DFID Growth and poverty reduction: the role of agriculture p27

likely to damage domestic agriculture in poorer countries are those arising from the EU and US. Articulate peasant voices in poorer countries are often raised in opposition to this body of assumptions. For example, Via Campesina the international peasant movement which mobilises small scale farmers across the world has repeatedly articulated this. On the occasion of the “G8” summit in 2009, African voices were raised in the same vein. *“The tens of millions of agricultural producers organized in the five regional networks of farmers’ organizations of Africa (EAFF, PROPAC, ROPPA, SACAU, UMAGR11) and united in the African Platform of Farmers’ Organizations are well aware that the world is undergoing crucial moments of its ecological, economic and social history... Structural adjustment policies, the Bretton Woods financial institutions and multinational corporations have not improved the way of life of rural people in Africa. What is more, the present system of liberalization and globalization accentuates poverty in our countries and creates food dependency.”³³* Therefore, in so far as their governments accede to the system, their relations with poorer and numerous farmers will be handicapped along with their ability to lead local response to climate change.

It is striking that neither Defra nor DFID has sought to advertise the IAASTD³⁴ report or cascade its findings within their organisation, let alone consider how they might be implemented.

It needs to be reiterated that the reasons for this probably lie in part, with Government as a whole, but also in the cultural and economic context in which it is set, rather than just with these two departments.

33 The Farmers’ Organizations of Africa address the G8, April 2009

34 See page 9 above

CHAPTER 4

Preparing the Ground*Restoring or Developing Relationships*

Its Importance “There is an intrinsic link between the challenge we face to ensure food security through the 21st century and other global issues, most notably climate change, population growth and the need to sustainably manage the world’s rapidly growing demand for energy and water. It is predicted that by 2030 the world will need to produce 50 per cent more food and energy, together with 30 per cent more available fresh water, whilst mitigating and adapting to climate change. This threatens to create a ‘perfect storm’ of global events”.³⁵

In a world facing the challenges of poverty, climate change, food insecurity and environmental damage, changes in perception, attitude and actions will have to occur at all levels, in all places, from the household to the international. But more is required at some points than others. Agriculture is one of those areas where much will be required.

Governments have to lead clear depiction of the issues at stake as well as debate, and research about responses. They have to set priorities, stimulate and assist action and lay down basic rules. There can be no nonsense about markets self-correcting to resolve the problem: this is a case where economic actors will be called on to take decisions bringing no return to themselves and which will only be useful if millions of others do likewise.

But if governments are central to the issue, their relationships with those whom they govern – those very relationships, which the previous sections of this paper have demonstrated to be threatened – are also vital to the success of any measures proposed.

In a world facing the challenges of poverty, climate change, food insecurity and environmental damage, changes in perception, attitude and actions will have to occur at all levels

³⁵ John Beddington, UK Government Chief Scientist, quoted in “Why No Thought for Food?” p8

Types of Relationships

RULES BASED

One possible approach to relationship is to try and determine appropriate patterns of behaviour for farmers, and then to draw up rules and regulations, linked with penalties to enforce them. This is likely to happen. Of course, there will have to be some broad-brush rules, but climate change, for example, is complex, certain interactions may not be fully understood and farms are very variable as are farmers

Farmers need to be able to use their own initiative and be able to take pride and satisfaction in their contributions to solving their problems.

and their aptitudes. There will be finely balanced decisions for which rules are not enabling but constricting. Farmers need to be able to use their own initiative and be able to take pride and satisfaction in their contributions to solving their problems. For this they need knowledge and understanding more than rules. We have already looked at the FCN study of farmers' experience of farm inspections, which shows the large part these play in farming lives, not forgetting that those not inspected are also impacted by the possibility. We need to remember the burden of regulation, which already exists, much of it being applied by people operating alone. In one

way, even regulation could be empowering if every rulebook were prefaced with a clear statement of the underlying reasons for what follows. In the UK the great danger is more aggravation; more incomprehension and more 'buy out'. In other contexts, where rules are expected to be flouted or to be unenforceable, a rules based approach will also be ineffective.

POTENTIAL OF PARTNERSHIP

Partnership has the potential to deliver more than other types of relationship because it can fully engage the abilities and energies of all the players in shared commitments.

From it there can grow a depth of mutual understanding and trust, which in turn, reduces the partners' apprehensions about each other's activities. This can enable the leading party to show more flexibility,

which is what farmers need to adopt policy aims to the particular and variable conditions of their farm. It is a virtuous circle, enriched by the possibility that costs will be reduced on both sides.

Mutual learning involving policy makers, extension workers, farmers and, if possible, local people can increase the sum of knowledge and understanding, leading to better policy enjoying more active support.

The Partners

GOVERNMENT

Government needs policies that are credible to farmers. Aspects of general policy, which governments pursue and which appear to conflict with the needs and understanding of farmers – trade policy, for example, need to be frankly explained, and farmers' problems with them acknowledged. Agricultural policy needs to be accompanied by a valuing of farming and farmers and appreciation of their potential. Also needed is a real understanding of farming and how it works. Such policy needs to be clear and consistent. For example, one fatal flaw in the UK Governments' initial advocacy of greater sustainability was that it was accompanied by simplistic preaching about "efficiency" and "competitiveness" the difficulty of combining best sustainable practice with the greatest competitive efficiency has often been glossed over. Competitiveness can be gained at the expense of the environment, labour or family. Banana production has exemplified this, but it is an issue affecting farming in many contexts. Short-term economic gain or even survival will at times conflict with benefit to the climate and the environment. This will have to be recognised. Policymaking will have to be transparent and have ears. Finally in application, policy will have to actually work and give space and encouragement for partners to build on and amplify the framework.

Agricultural policy needs to be accompanied by a valuing of farming and farmers and appreciation of their potential.

Without these things there will be "buy out" which will cripple any grassroots relationship.

FARMERS

Anywhere in the world they can seem scattered, elusive, inward looking and conservative. Their work is often consuming of time and energy and requires an intense local focus. In some countries there seems to be an incorrigible individualism. In the UK they are sometimes isolated from local inhabitants and even from each other. These tendencies have been worsened by their spouses' need to work off the farm to make ends meet, together with the farms' inability to pay for other help.

However, change is very possible. UK agriculture changed massively in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. A few hundred years ago some of the UK's and Africa's present staple crops such as potatoes, maize and cassava were unknown in either of these places. Importantly in this context, there are many examples of partnership between government and farmers producing major results. In our own country there was the total reversal of farming policy and farming actuality in response to the Second World War. The campaign to eradicate bovine TB in the 1950's onwards is another example. In the same period there was the successful programme to introduce swamp rice into parts of Eastern Nigeria, in which high quality extension work was crucial. Farming people are in reality perfectly able to change.

Even among the most individualistic farming populations there are usually social networks and norms of behaviour. During Farm Crisis Network discussions with senior bank staff, one told us that in his bank's experience, however long it takes and however hard it is, farmers tend always to pay debts. Other norms dovetail with a climate and environment agenda. For example in the last ten years there has been considerable "environmental activity" on UK farms. Even when it has been supported by "schemes" these have typically only reimbursed the lesser part of the costs. This work can be linked to farmers' sense of their identity, their role in society.

However, change is very possible. UK agriculture changed massively in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

THE ROLE OF THIRD PARTIES

The DFID report says "*Better uptake pathways for technology are needed. In many parts of the world, particularly Africa, agricultural extension services are severely limited in their ability to reach farmers. There have been many innovations in recent years in more diverse knowledge systems that involve the public and private sectors. NGOs can also play an important role: they tend to have credibility with farmers and are effective at accessing poor people*".³⁶

Experience in Malawi provides a case in point. Quoting Dan Taylor again:

Find Your Feet commenced working in Malawi in 1994. It currently operates in Malawi as FAIR, a joint rural livelihoods programme with two other organisations, which implements through in country partners. While most of the partners are local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), we decided to make the MZUZU Agricultural Division (MZADD), one of eight regional divisions covering the whole country, an exception. We did this for the reason that Malawian NGOs working on agricultural and environmental issues are small and lack capacity; on the other hand MZADD, as an arm of government, has a wide reach, with staff employed in some of the remotest parts of Malawi. We wanted over time to be in a position to scale-up our sustainable agriculture activities.

Our first step was to make optimal use of local available resources as a substitute for expensive and inaccessible fertilisers – hence compost making. In 2002, FAIR supported 26 MZADD in a compost making competition, which targeted some 200,000 farmers in three districts in the north of Malawi. In the first year of the competition, over 120,000 compost heaps/pits were made; this was to be superseded in the following year by a record breaking 1.2 million compost heaps/pits. On the back of this success, we launched the Lead Farmer Programme, which was designed to identify innovative and successful farmers, who could train others – Follower Farmers – in sustainable technologies

³⁶ DFID Growth and poverty reduction p. 33

that would increase productivity. Lead Farmers were to perform three functions: impart their knowledge of local conditions, constraints and solutions

to Follower Farmers; teach Follower Farmers a simple set of technologies that would conserve the natural resource base on which agriculture depends; and provide community-based leadership sharing knowledge and information. The idea was that Lead Farmers – as leaders and good agriculturalists – would effectively train Follower Farmers who would adopt, adapt and utilise new practices from both endogenous and exogenous sources.

As things stand over 10,000 farmers have now been trained in sustainable agricultural techniques and technologies.

In 2004/05 an initial 20 Lead Farmers were identified on the basis of their knowledge, aptitude and commitment to helping others and subsequently trained. In the following year, a further 16 were trained, then another 15 in the year thereafter, and then a further 40 in 2008. The number of Lead Farmers now stands at 91 each of whom trains approximately 100 Follower Farmers – with some having considerably more, and other considerably fewer, followers. As things stand over 10,000 farmers have now been trained in sustainable agricultural techniques and technologies.

What changed?

The success of the approach has had a ripple effect. First it was adopted by other NGOs in the Northern Region of Malawi and then by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security through a few other ADDS elsewhere in Malawi. It has now been adopted throughout Malawi.

There is increasing realisation that, for the foreseeable future, fertilisers will not, and arguably will never, be affordable for considerable numbers of farmers. At the same time, soil erosion and the depletion of soil organic matter content reduces soil nutrient levels and water holding capacity of Malawi's tropical soils. New institutional forms and ways of learning that must be rooted in communities are emerging.

What still needs to change?

Malawi has a maize intensification policy that promotes high levels of inputs. It also has a diversification strategy that recognises, to some degree, the limitations of basing its national food security on a single crop – maize. It is also aware that fertilisers are unaffordable for Malawian farmers unless subsidised by the state – the national input subsidisation strategy is donor dependent and also involves diverting resources from other ministries such as education and health. This strategy is not aimed at the poorest farmers who are to be targeted with social protection measures – ‘handouts’ in other terms. The Malawi government supports composting and other low external input strategies because it is aware of the dependency its subsidisation approach creates. So ministry officials are sometimes the ‘suppliers’ of fertiliser; at other times they are bearers of low cost alternatives. This results in a confusing, mixed message. Lead Farmers are the bearers of this alternative message but may themselves be subject to conflicting signals by being beneficiaries of input subsidies.

To improve agricultural extension and end this confusion:

Lead Farmers: should be treated more as innovators and custodians of local agricultural knowledge from whom ministry officials can learn

Farmers: should be offered information about the pros and cons of fertilisers and other alternatives so they can make an informed choice.

Ministry of Agriculture: should resolve its conflicting policies and reward staff who are able to listen and learn from farmers and not perceive their role as bearers of ‘agricultural truths’. If food security for Malawi is to become a permanent reality, Lead Farmers offer one way forward.³⁷

In this Malawi example the NGOs acted directly as a catalyst in the relation between farmers and Government. Both seem to have been remarkably open and receptive to this: there must have been trust. The “third world” has many examples of third party involvement in

³⁷ Dr Dan Taylor (Find Your Feet)

development but perhaps not always with such a clear intention to involve government agents and help them into a renewed interaction with farmers. The nature of FCN's work led frequently to intervention in the relations of individual farmers with government, which led to working with groups within the Government structure to ease relationships generally. In the UK, of course, there are private agencies and individuals who earn their living giving advice to farmers. They have been spasmodically used by the Government to "deliver" packages of information and advice. This certainly does not build an enduring two-way relationship, but it may assist change and could be better used, especially where such advisors have built up consistent relationships with clients. As we have seen, extension work in Scotland is carried out by the Scottish Agricultural Colleges.

In the UK there are farmer discussion groups of all sorts with an ongoing life and scope to enable government agents to meet farmers on their own ground. The Church of England Diocese of Exeter and FCN have encouraging, though demanding, experience of catalysing the formation of farm family groups, meeting regularly for mutual support and settling their own agenda. Such groups might relate to Government where a productive response seemed likely.

The particular role of Churches and Christian bodies

Very often there is a pervasive Christian presence in rural and farming areas and Christian bodies may at times enjoy a measure of confidence from farm families. In addition they can bring some understanding into relationships and some of the linked issues.

At this time, many Christian organisations are working to explore the theological implications of climate change, and the ways in which Christians can assist their communities in responding to the challenges it poses. Within that wider context, Christian clarity on the issues surrounding agriculture can help to lessen the gulf that can exist between farmers and others in their communities. There are also insights from the Bible and points of theology and practice that contribute to working to encourage better relationships.

It is important to be clear about these. A very obvious example is provided by the English situation around Bovine TB. In an earlier period, beginning in the 1950s, farmers and Ministry of Agriculture probably shared a broadly common set of assumptions, about the need to manage livestock, wildlife and landscape for the good of the whole. As a result TB in cattle was brought largely under control. There are now a variety of worldviews about the relations between humanity and animals, including wild animals. They range from the starkly commercial to a view that wildlife should not be managed, controlled or culled – particularly not for what is seen as purely economic reasons. In recent years, not any longer involved with these original shared assumptions, Defra has appeared to drift away from the earlier loose consensus, leaving the farmers feeling angry and betrayed. The history of our island points to the fact that our landscape, wild life habitats and even the types of wildlife living here, are the product of human activity and management. This makes a project of ceasing that management precarious. This does link with Christian teaching about stewardship and care for Creation – correctly understood a gentle and co-operative process. However it does not reflect the whole force of Biblical insights. In respect of the relationship between humankind and the rest of Creation, parents' relations with their children provide an analogy. Parents have authority and responsibility in this relationship but this is not all there is to it. At bottom, within the love of God and their love for each other all, including parents and children are equal, all made of the same stuff. In the same way, Adam, the first man, emblematic of humanity is depicted as being "*fashioned – of dust from the soil*" (Genesis 27). Psalm 104 is an ecstatic poem about God and Creation – an intimate relationship, "*May God find joy in what he creates*". In Psalm 148, everyone and everything from the sun to the snow and rain from mountains to farm animals as well as all degrees of people are urged to join together in one extraordinary song of praise.

There are now a variety of worldviews about the relations between humanity and animals, including wild animals.

Much later this is echoed in the life and words of St Francis of Assisi. These are examples, which lead one to ask why the temptation to turn stones into bread was one of the three possible distortions of his Ministry confronting Christ at its beginning. (Gospel of Luke 4.1-13). There is a paradox in combining responsibility for and fellowship with Creation.

I want to suggest that these threads can become a basis for trying to bring about some reconciliation of conflicting assumptions – a deeper understanding may enable the reconciler at least to remain steady themselves, and possibly to draw people onto some common ground. There are other broader examples where underlying insight could be very important.

This call to prioritise Godly things above immediate material necessity can seem a little crazy or foolhardy but the challenge of, for example, climate change casts another light on it.

We can see that, in the UK, the changes in farm practice arising from the earlier partnership produced economic benefits to the farmers. The same was true of the spread of swamp rice in Eastern Nigeria. The results of the extension work described in Malawi is rather more surprising – over a million compost pits! Benefit to the farmers, yes, but via very hard extra work. Responding to challenges of climate and environment will demand more vision, more senses of the long-term but more than that it will need a form of altruism. Farmers will have to act well beyond their own immediate economic interests – with the knowledge that if others do not do the same the effort could be wasted.

For farmers to do this without imperilling the continuation of their farming demands skill and judgement, but more than that it brings them within the orbit of Jesus' *"seek first the Kingdom of God and all these other things will be added to you"*³⁸. This call to prioritise Godly things above immediate material necessity can seem a little crazy or foolhardy but the challenge of, for example, climate change casts another light on it.

38 Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, 22-32

As well as bearing challenges for farmers, a Christian mediation also carries challenges for itself and for any authority. At the outset of his ministry Jesus read publicly from the prophet Isaiah.

*"He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight to set the downtrodden free"*³⁹

In many parts of the world the situation of peasants and small farmers echoes this passage, and as FCN has discovered there are plenty of "downtrodden" among English farmers. There is a standard of service demanded of both mediator and authority:

*"You know that among the pagans their rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant."*⁴⁰.

It is important that a mediator, whilst listening thoroughly, does not equivocate over their own conviction in a false attempt to gain people's confidence. Clarity about the reasons for bringing people together is also important. Dealing with power is difficult and fraught with pitfalls. However, we have reached a point where even power may come to see that the prevailing view of "free" economy and consumer choice cannot provide the motivation to produce change even when its ally regulation is called in to curb its consequences.

39 Gospel of Luke 4.1

40 Gospel of Mark 10.42-44

CHAPTER 5

**Germs of Hope
Can Partnerships be Restored?**

A first step in restoring or changing a situation is to recognise and own present reality. Important groundwork has been laid in England by the National Audit Office and the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee of the House of Commons in exposing and revealing some of the painful truths of the last few years. More recently the Parliamentary Ombudsman has gone further by not only bluntly regaling the events but by recognising “what happened to individuals who sustained an injustice due to RPA’s “mistakes”⁴¹ as a result. If one party helplessly endures injustice at the hands of another, a great barrier is placed between them until the powerful party recognizes the wrong and acts to restore trust. This report brings ethical solidity to the issue: a sense of righteousness, which is much needed.

In the UK it is also very important that close relations have been maintained centrally between agencies of government and farming’s representative bodies.

There remain staff within DEFRA agencies who can inspire trust and respect. The NALMI enquiry found that although only a fifth of the farmers could provide a trusted name within DEFRA agencies, those that could praised staff of what was then the Rural Development Service, some of these now work for Natural England and work hard with limited resources to generate trusting relationships of farmers. Some of these will have lingered on into “Natural England” and indeed they have continued to contrive partnerships with farmers within the Agency’s brief. Through the chaos of 2005 and 2006 some staff in the Rural Payments Agency laboured mightily to rescue farmers from calamity. Farm Crisis Network had direct experience of this. Notable in this regard are the small group within the main RPA call centre

⁴¹ Parliamentary Ombudsman Press Release 16 December 2009

commissioned to assist “stress cases”. Serious efforts have been made to humanize the inspection process on farms, which can be very stressful. (See “Twenty five regulations per acre FCN 2007). In Malawi it appears that dormant extension staff came to life with the advent of a clear programme of engagement with farmers, with a role for them in it. I believe the same could happen in England and perhaps even in Egypt!

The objection will inevitably be raised that Government cannot afford Extension work. In some situations as in the Malawi example, they are already paying for it without invigorating and using it. In England and Wales it appears that when the Rural Payments Agency’s affairs are finally sorted out, the funds for a new partnership relationship will be available. The National Audit Office reported⁴² that the administrative cost per single farm payment claimant in Scotland was £285 whilst in England and Wales in 2008-9 the “full staff cost” was £1743. Nearly a £1000 per farm or even a part of that would fund an effective extension service.

When UK Government leaders have shown active concern – for example when Baroness Hayman met pig farmers during the 2000 swine fever outbreak, there has been a response. In recent years, Lord Rooker has been met with open minds and some warmth.

The same Minister was the harbinger of some shifts in attitude towards farming in the UK. These were crystallized in Hilary Benn’s forward to Defra’s “The Future of our Farming” published in July 2009”. *“Agriculture is at the heart of the two great challenges we face – food security and climate change and we are increasingly recognising the vital role that farmers play. From where I stand this is not before time”*. From this basic view a renewed approach to grassroots partnership with farmers might grow – just as the basic view revealed in 2005 undermined it.⁴³

There appears to be active questioning in DFID about why agricultural progress in poor countries lags behind that in health and education, or put another way why “interventions” in Agriculture have had less positive effect than those in health and education.

42 “A second progress update on the Administration of the Single Payment Scheme by the Rural Payment Agency” National Audit Office October 2009

43 Hilary Benn’s comments on Radio 4 Today programme on Jan 5 2010 reinforces this hope.

The recent report of an All Party Working Group in Agriculture and Development – “Why No Thought for Food?” is a potential turning point in the thinking of politicians and perhaps also of DFID. Firstly there is reality – DFID’s Director General of Policy and Research is quoted as saying *“We have to be very careful not to pull out of a sector. This is exactly what the development community did when it became too difficult in agriculture about 15 years ago – and we now have a big problem because of that.”*⁴⁴ The report underlines the truth of this by stating that spending in agricultural programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2008-9 made up only 0.35% of DFID’s total budget! Further the report states *“There has been an almost total collapse of agricultural extension services in many African countries”*.⁴⁵

Secondly there has been real listening, not just to those within the established culture of trade, global economy and “industrialised” agriculture, but also to other voices.

Thirdly there are clear recommendations to DFID among which is “Re-focus on Agricultural Education and Extension”.

Internationally there are also some hopeful straws in the wind. That the G8 governments held a summit in 2009 on food security is encouraging and that their concluding declaration mentioned that “special focus must be devoted to some small holders and women farmers” is more so. But perhaps the greatest sign of hope is the appearance of the IAASTD report itself (referred to at the beginning) and its warm reception in much of the world. This comprehensive report underlines the realities of farming and its needs for the future with authority and clarity. One of the recommendations in “Why No Thought For Food?” is *“Implement the findings of the comprehensive International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) approved by Ministers in June 2008”*⁴⁶

The farmers are there; often the people to engage with them are too and now perhaps there is a new approach emerging within and close to authority.

44 Andrew Steer, Director General of Policy and Research DFID to the International Development Committee November 2009

45 “Why No Thought for Food?” APPG January 2010 p22

46 Why No Thought for Food? APPG January 2010 p.31

Getting Started

The difficulties are great. In England and even more explicitly in Egypt there is the gulf opened by Government espousal of policies seen as inimical to farmers. In both these examples there is also a recent bad history. In the “developed” world there is the problem that agriculture like every other facet of life has become largely dependent on fossil fuels. Nitrogen fertilizer has been at the heart of the large increases in yield of crops and produce since 1950, whilst food distribution has involved ever-greater road mileages.

Extension work can get off to a good start when it contains messages that lead to a quick benefit to the recipients. However, with some of the current challenges the benefits are more likely to come to the recipients’ children, and then only if many others also act. In the Malawian example fertiliser was expensive and supply uncertain so a message leading to a similar response with hard work substituted for fertiliser produced change, but other changes will be harder. In the English case there is the challenge of getting from rules only to participatory extension work without losing what the rules encapsulate.

To some extent good Government is only ever possible if at least some citizens act beyond their own material needs and the requirement of laws and rules. However the requirements present are in some respects like those of war – progress is really only possible if most raise their sights and act beyond their own immediate interests and they accept hardships.

This is why the “messages” need to be discussed, worked into local contexts and owned by all parties. It will require consistency of staffing, good training, and often a change of mindset in Government, and receptivity and ingenuity in farmers. Both parties would be wise to consider the possible role in a renaissance of partnership of third parties both commercial, such as consultants, and charitable, such as Find your Feet, Farm Crisis Network or LEAF. However, on all sides there are people ready and willing to work together in new ways in response to the challenges facing agriculture.