



## **European Conference on Crop Diversification 2019**

**Comments made at the closing panel discussion**

**Donal Murphy Bokern**

**Budapest, 20 September 2019**

This panel discussion is about feedback from stakeholders. So the first question is whose stake do I hold? For this panel's purpose, I'll try to represent the stake held by public research investors ('funders') and the stake farmers hold. I have been involved in public research funding in different ways for twenty years and I hope earlier experience allows me to briefly represent those we depend on most for change: farmers.

This was a very good meeting. Such a gathering is one of those things that would need to be invented if we did not already have it. The organisers did a tremendous job in getting such excellent keynote presentations. The clarity of John Ingram's presentation of the food system is potentially valuable to us in our efforts to drive impact from this research. It provides us with a clear conceptual model of the system. John also made two other points that I feel are very important. The first is he drew attention to the distinction between the consumer and the citizen. This has profound implications for the rationale for public intervention. For too long it has been glibly assumed that the 'consumer' can take responsibility for the impacts of the food system thereby relieving those who represent the 'citizen' of that responsibility. This means 'consumers' cannot be expected to adequately address market failure. Politicians and policy-makers working on behalf of citizens are required to intervene to protect the public goods such as a stable climate, clean water and animal welfare. The second important point was the observation that the term 'agro-ecology', which is the name of a scientific discipline, has been captured by those representing belief systems. They have stretched its meaning to breaking point. Forty years ago, much of what we now call 'agro-ecological' practice was simply good farm practice. Principles and practices thought then in colleges and universities can be traced back for example in Britain and Ireland to Lord Townshend, Arthur Young and others. More recently, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and biologists at that time influenced university curricula in the 1970s and 1980s by teaching a great deal of ecology to underpin agricultural practice.

### **The public investors' stake**



Legumes Translated (Translating knowledge for legume-based farming for feed and food systems) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 817634

Forty million euros is a large investment made by the European Union in the research reported at this conference. Looking back on the meeting, my impression is of a large body of well-presented and well-conducted applied biological research with additional work on what I term here as 'agro-sociology'. In contrast with the rural sociology research I encountered as a student, some of the more sociological research struck me as concerned with questions that are not clearly researchable or with questions others might be better placed to answer. The record that the meeting has generated in the abstracts is very useful for identifying links with for example Legumes Translated. It would take more time to examine the abstracts of the presentation, but a general impression is pathways to impact are not prominent. I think it is reasonable to view this research as applied research that society expects will lead to change. There is a case therefore for working to a plan for that change (a theory of change). John Ingram provided us with a model of the food system as a whole. It strikes me that a combination of John Ingram's conceptual model of the food system with a theory of change approach that is used in economic and social development work would help the consortia as a group to move forward towards impact. The consortia are fortunate in many ways. The time for their chosen theme (diversity) has come. The Common Agricultural Policy has adopted 'crop diversification' as a goal. The wider value chains will change too. We now see European leaders calling for diversification in how we source protein in a way that was considered very radical just a year ago. The proposals for the next round of CAP reform set out to us by Emmanuel Petel are rich in opportunities for science-supported change.

But supporting change (impact) is difficult for many in the European agricultural research community. A great deal will depend on how citizens' expectations are addressed by policy-makers. I heard it said this week in Budapest that it is difficult for scientists to engage with policy. I say the opposite: scientists as guardians of controlled observation and rational thinking are uniquely well-placed to engage with policy. Like in almost all other areas of work, motivation is crucial. Julie Dawson from Wisconsin gave us insight into an agricultural research and innovation system that explicitly mandates and rewards scientists who balance the generation of knowledge with the support for the use of knowledge. From the USA, where the market is relied on so much, her talk described the explicit recognition in the land-grant university system of the role the public sector plays in innovation, in this case in plant breeding. Reward for a balance in every researcher between different types of research impact combined with a more realistic assessment of the respective roles of the public and private sectors in innovation would make a huge difference in Europe.

### **The farmers' stake**

Despite the multi-actor approach which seeks to put the user at the heart of the research planning process, applied farm research seems to me to be still dominated by the aspirations of scientists in their quest for scientific impact. Recent analyses that I have been involved in actually show that the role of research users (innovators) in leading framework programme collaborative agri-food research projects as indicated by coordinating organisations has declined over the last twenty years. For individual researchers, the balance that Julie Dawson from Wisconsin talked about is missing and efforts to support other areas of impact are regarded almost as an opportunity cost to



academic progress. Changing this is entirely in the hands of the academic community itself and projects such as the German-funded SynSICRIS project might help in this rebalancing.

The EU's investment in agri-food, forestry and fisheries research and innovation is set to reach 10 billion euros in the next framework programme. Much of this investment is now an intrinsic part of the Common Agricultural Policy. Farmers are certainly entitled to expect effective research and impact. Investing this amount effectively to deliver change in value chains is a significant practical research and innovation policy challenge. After having participated in a number of European Commission events addressing this challenge this year I would say one thing clearly: if we want innovation, we must invest directly in the innovators, i.e., in the farmers and other people in value chains who make change happen.

Good farmers are applied ecologists. Anyone who has sat at a farming-family's kitchen table will know that farmers are also innovators by nature. I noticed in Budapest this week that we still lapse into the assumption that publically-funded researchers and "advisors" need to "convince" and "persuade" (passive) farmers to change. We still thoughtlessly say that these changes must be "promoted" to farmers using state-sponsored "knowledge transfer". And we assume farmers do not want to invest time in gaining knowledge and are not minded to consider knowledge or research results presented in anything but the most abbreviated way. These are all assumptions passed down from an out-dated innovation model that can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century when for example state-employed scientifically-trained "instructors" were charged in Ireland with promoting farm innovation. Good farmers devote their lives to understanding and improving their farms. If we want ecological innovation on farms, we need to invest in these farmers and other value chain decision-makers. That investment must be about empowerment with understanding, not about telling farmers what to do.

