Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

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Report on workshop on social and environmental aspects

Andrew Errington

Can I start by thanking the person who had the most difficult task in the room, that was our rapporteur, Lucy Harrison. We tried to distil points from the very varied and quite wide-ranging discussion. We have eight points, four that are about the situation as it is, and four that are about what is to be done.

Point number one was about biodiversity, recognising that farmers are part of the format of our natural countryside. The group's view, even though this is a meeting of the Small Farmers' Association and this view was coming from members of that association, was very clear that what we needed was diversity of farm sizes and types in the countryside.

Point number two: the group identified a number of distinct contributions that the small family-farm sector, including part-time farms, makes to society. First of all, they are particularly well equipped to provide the variety and quality of distinctive regional foods. Secondly, they help to maintain a vibrant working rural community by providing employment and by holding population, particularly in the peripheral rural areas. Thirdly, they can provide the stewardship required to maintain or enhance the quality of the rural environment. So, small farmers can rely on the market to pay them for the first of these contributions to society. If they are producing distinctive regional foods that the consumers want, the consumers will tell them by buying those foods. But, payment for the other public goods that these farmers are providing to society and to the rural environment will not come directly from the public, it has got to come from institutionalised transfers from the rest of society, ie through various forms of

Government-initiated support. So that's point number two, the distinctive contribution.

Point number three. It is very dangerous to make universal generalisations, either about the small family farm or about rural areas, since both are very heterogeneous. For example, small farmers without successors may farm in a more extensive and environmentally friendly way, simply because they do not need to support the two generations that a farm identical in every other respect but with a successor intended and coming up may have. Secondly, this diversity of rural areas - again we have got to recognise that some members of the workshop felt that there are some rural areas where the incoming non-farming population may provide a just as vibrant, albeit rather different, rural community.

Point number four, on the situation at present. It is probably rather important to distinguish an objective of ensuring the survival of presently existing small or family-farm businesses from the rather different objective of ensuring that the species survives. Some people in the group were quite clear that we should not ignore the need to keep the door open to new entrants who would again come into the small-farming sector even though they are not currently part of it. Some of these, members of the group felt, might actually be better at delivering some of the public goods that we talked about earlier, than some existing small family farmers.

Four quick points on what needs to be done:

(i) Small farmers need more information about what their customers actually want in terms of the type of rural community and the type of rural environment that society requires. There is a need for more market research on these non-marketed public goods. If you are producing a product and you are selling it, it is down to the person who is producing the product and attempting to sell it to conduct that market research. Where the products are public goods, it is much more difficult to ascertain exactly what the public requires and there is an implication here that for these public goods the logical 'person' to conduct market research on behalf of society was the Government.

(ii) Small farmers need to sell their case for survival and help educate the wider public. There is consensus about that, but a difference of opinion about whom the message should be targeted at. Should it be, as some thought, the general public and particularly the group that was called *Homo urbanis*, urban man, upon whom the survival of *Homo ruralis*, rural man, now depends? Should it be the general public, should it rather be pressure groups and lobbying organisations or should it be directly to the decision takers, the politicians?

(iii) Small farmers also need to sell their case for their survival in farming to their own children, since the survival of the family in

farming will ultimately depend on the decisions of these youngsters. If there is concern with morale and a crisis of confidence in farming, there is a particular concern about morale and crisis of confidence among the up-and-coming generation, those who will be the small farmers in ten or twenty years time.

(iv) Final point. The group felt that the maintenance of a vibrant rural society and an attractive rural environment would not be achieved simply through paying small family farmers for the public goods that they deliver to society. That is important, but it is not the whole story. Support for agriculture should form part, albeit an important part, of integrated strategies for rural areas that go much wider than agriculture and agricultural employment.