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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

Edited by S P Carruthers & F A Miller

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Ethics or survival

Ken Holgate

For thousands of years farmers throughout the world have tended the land fed an ever increasing population. This has been done in two ways, by increasing the amount of land that is under the plough and by increasing productivity.

But is it right that vast tracts of forest are ripped out and the land plundered for food until all fertility is extracted, only for us to repeat the exercise to replace the exhausted land with yet more reclaimed from the forest? What damage are we doing to the environment, to wildlife and to the planet? What legacy are we leaving for future generations? Is it right that we apply more and more artificial fertilisers and pesticides in order to continuously increase output? We must stop and ask ourselves: can we continue to do this and is it necessary anyway?

If we come nearer to home and take a look at the United Kingdom, we find many areas that have been unchanged for centuries, where Britain is still a 'green and pleasant land'. However, even here subtle and undesirable changes are taking place. And there are other areas of Britain where more far-reaching changes have taken place; one field in an arable area can be bigger than a whole farm in Less Favoured Areas!

There are a number of factors that have caused these changes, and by no means all have been under the control of the farmer or land owner. In the early 1940s production was rigidly controlled by government, the objective being that farmers should produce as much of the produce required by the population of Great Britain as possible. After 1945 imports gradually began to increase again. Successive governments pursued a policy of cheap food, importing any produce

that was cheaper than our own, mainly, but not exclusively, from the Commonwealth.

Farmers were then forced to change from traditional methods just to stay in business and prevent the onset of bankruptcy. They were encouraged in this by the large agrochemical firms, the animal feed millers, the Milk Marketing Board, the Meat and Livestock Commission and successive Governments. Upon our entry into the European Common Market, with its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and pricing and subsidy system, most farmers took the opportunity to increase output and, therefore, income. The Ministry of Agriculture is still exhorting us today to become more efficient businesses: unfortunately by this they invariably mean intensive.

We are at a crossroads! We, and more especially the European Commission and our National Government, have to decide whether we intend to continue down the same route which would seemingly lead to both the degradation of the environment and the continued mass exodus from the land of farmers and workers (either forced out by bankruptcy or by despair at being unable to scrape even a meagre living from the land). Many small and family farms have been forced to intensify against their better judgement solely to stay in business. The alternative is to allow farmers to make a decent living from the land without having to resort to intensive methods which will eventually destroy us all.

We must look for a method of agriculture which will feed an increasing population, is sustainable for generations to come, and which will not further degrade the environment, but rather gradually improve it. The most notable method of sustainable agriculture is of course Organic Farming which has grown in popularity over recent years. This is a method, which has been adopted voluntarily by a number of farmers. It is currently financed by the premium obtained for the produce above the normal market price. The size of the market relies on the number of consumers that believe that organic produce is better and are prepared to pay a higher price for it. Without subsidies or support this method of farming is obviously self-limiting. In addition, a large proportion of farmers would like the opportunity to practise a more extensive system of farming without having to conform to all the rules that are necessary to be an organic producer. Such an approach could also be sustainable and environmentally friendly.

If we are to safeguard our children, our children's children and future generations, and the ecological balance of our planet, we must look towards a system of agriculture which is sustainable and maintains the environment. Farmers cannot do this alone. The present financial burden is already too great without any added cost caused by changes in practice and reduction in output. Some money from the CAP could,

without doubt, be redirected, but, as with anything, there will be a cost. Inevitably it is the people that have to pay, either in the form of increased food prices, or *via* increased taxation. It is important, therefore, that the public are made aware of the situation and are persuaded of its rectitude. It is only then that pressure can be brought to bear on the European Commission and National Governments.

There are other problems which must be addressed. Not least of all, the issue of food produced in other countries who pay scant heed to the environment, to the use and safety of pesticides, to the well-being of the workers or to the feeding of the indigenous population. All too frequently we hear of food and goods being exported from Third World countries, in order to pay massive debts, or, worst of all, to finance internal wars and conflicts.

Should we restrict, by tariff barriers, imports into the Community from regions that can produce food considerably cheaper than us? Do we allow our own land to become derelict and put our farmers on the dole, or send them to live in the cities and work in the factories? We must protect our own countryside, our own farmers and all the ancillary industries that they support together with the rural infrastructure.

Finally, we come to the thorny issue of animal welfare. In any walk of life there are people who are unfeeling or even cruel and this has to be prevented by legislation. Most farmers are sympathetic to their animals; an unhappy animal, or one that is suffering stress, does not thrive, so, apart from any other consideration, it is in the farmer's interest to treat stock with respect. However, the old adage about lame ducks is very true and sometimes a farmer will appear to be unduly hard, but this does not mean that he does not care. The transport of live animals is another subject that causes a lot of problems. The distance an animal travels to the market or abattoir is frequently not under the control of the farmer. The longer the journey the more loss of weight the animal undergoes and so it is also in the farmer's interest that the journey should be as stress free and short as possible. Some consumers will only purchase fresh meat, not chilled or frozen produce, and so it is necessary that sometimes live animals travel long distances. These should be regulated, not stopped. If we get a thorn in our finger we do not cut the finger off. Likewise if there is something wrong with the way that animals are transported this should be put right. It is in no one's interest if an animal arrives at the point of slaughter suffering from stress, excessive weight loss, bruising or even dead.

Farming needs to change direction, it needs to be sustainable and environmentally friendly. We have the opportunity - let's hope we all have the courage to grasp it!