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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Food production and our rural environment – The way ahead

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Conclusions from the Discussions

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One of the major functions of a discussion is to allow participants to identify topics that they consider should have been included in the programme and that they feel were omitted from the formal papers or, at any rate, not mentioned sufficiently.

Two such emerged clearly during this meeting.

The first concerned **Organic Farming**. The argument here was that organic farming was a major option in trying to achieve a blend of production and environmental care. It was claimed that it combined all the desirable features: it produces less per hectare — thus helping to reduce overproduction; it requires few harmful inputs — thus greatly reducing pollution from agrochemicals and deleterious effects on organisms and their habitats; it produces healthier foods, of higher quality and free from toxic residues.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that organic farming depended upon premium prices in order to make economic sense; that the market for its products was not only limited but confined to the "better-off" — on any scale, it was restricted to the middle-classes and could not meet the needs of "ordinary" people; that it did not necessarily contribute to better care of the environment, except in terms of lower inputs; and that it could not produce sufficient food to meet the needs of this country, let alone the millions of hungry elsewhere.

There was considerable agreement, however, that organic farming had been relatively neglected in terms of research and development and that much of value might be learned from such research and, indeed, from organic farming practice.

The second omission was claimed to be any real detail as to concrete ways in which any of the farming systems discussed would actually achieve the improvements to the environment that were sought. Speakers did not entirely accept this, however, and considered that they had pinpointed quite a number of specific ways in which care of the environment would be improved.

Two important general points could be discerned emerging from both the discussion and from the afternoon papers. These were that (a) **the main options discussed were not necessarily mutually exclusive** – that is that, nationally, all three options, and others, could well find a place in the farming scene; and (b) **no system automatically guarantees environmental care** – all can be badly operated from this point of view.

The more optimistic and constructive way of stating this same conclusion is that **most systems can be operated with environmental care as an objective** and can achieve substantial improvements without necessarily reducing productivity or profit to a damaging extent.

Only small-scale farming would appear to offer any real possibility of increasing or retaining rural populations but the extent of its contribution has not really been estimated. If it is true that large effects on rural population are unlikely to come directly from agricultural enterprises but from small rural industries, then farming at all scales could contribute. This could flow from added-value enterprises or simply the provision of sites and facilities for non-farm activities, some of which could be related to tourism, thus also improving access to the countryside.

The point has been made repeatedly that only a flourishing agriculture can afford to look after the environment and a similar argument is made that large, profitable farms can more easily provide the base for small industries.

Amongst the small-scale activities mentioned in the discussion was **the productive use of small woodlands**. It was pointed out that four-fifths of small woodlands are on farms and that most of them are not managed. Assistance of various kinds is needed in this area and there are problems with marketing.

More study needs to be directed to the productive use of small woodlands in ways that are consistent with environmental care and conservation. There appears to be a prospect of achieving all these ends by using more labour and thus providing employment, although it is pointed out that people are not necessarily attracted by this kind of work.

Since one of the factors influencing debate on both food production and the environment is **overproduction**, there was considerable discussion of what it means, how serious it is and how it could be avoided.

It was pointed out that it is a more comfortable problem than starvation and that we could not be absolutely certain that food would be plentiful in the

future, either on world markets or within the U.K.

It was also pointed out that one's view of what constituted overproduction depended upon the possibility of devising ways of providing effective food aid, both "crisis" and "development", and upon the prospects for export.

It was argued that lower prices would eventually lower production but might result in short-term increases. It was further argued that it did not greatly matter how much was produced provided that it was done at low enough costs to enable us to compete in world markets. However, it was pointed out that such markets are not unlimited.

If overproduction is avoided by producing less, it follows that (a) less land is used, or (b) land is less intensively farmed or (c) land is used for other crops — ones that do not contribute to current surpluses.

Little thought has yet been given to what these alternative crops might be and how land that might be taken out of farming should be paid for (or how the capacity to farm it again could be retained for the future, should it prove to be needed again).

Indeed, it is evident that a lot of important issues — especially **long-term issues** — have not been systematically examined and it was questioned whether we were doing enough long-term thinking about agriculture.

The discussion suggested that it was, in fact, necessary to think even more widely than this and to consider the relationships and priorities between all the major forms of land use.

Two related proposals were put forward.

The first was for a **White Paper on Agriculture**, which would enshrine the recent agreement, on all sides, on the need to integrate farming and environmental care, and would spell out the new directions in which Agriculture should go, as opposed to the previous policy of going flat out for higher output by higher inputs.

The second was that there should be **integrated thinking about combined rural land-use policy**, a responsibility currently divided amongst different bodies and not really the concern of any one.

It was also pointed out that both would benefit from wide-ranging consultation and public debate — of the kind that this symposium had aimed to promote.