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A FarmED Team Reflection on ORFC Global 2021

ORFC is always a great start to the year and we're regular sponsors of the event. This year, the FarmED team were involved in ORFC Global and rebort back on some of the findings and takeaway messages.

What a conference! What a gathering of minds and passion! It was a delight to be involved. The whole FarmED team joined in their chosen sessions and shared their thoughts online, while Ian, Jonty and Alexis ran two talks with Dr Sally Bell and guest speakers from the RAU and The Rodale Institute. The event was overwhelming at times and it will take time to take it all in and catch up with the bits we missed but new contacts have been made and fruitful collaborations will follow.

We thought we would reflect by teasing out three key messages from this year's ORFC, focusing on what it means for us at FarmED.

There's no such thing as one-size-fits-all!

Many speakers lamented the problematic symptoms of the current globalised food system. Yet many of these symptoms arise from the fact that this system depends on standardisation and uniformity of agricultural production, processing, retail, and consumption. Just look at the dramatic decline of crop and livestock diversity witnessed in the last 100 years, paired with the increased concentration of power within the food system. Or the ways in which small farmers and abattoirs have to jump through the same policy hoops as their larger counterparts.

Given the wide range of challenges we face as a species it is not surprising that we have developed an array of ‘alternative’ approaches to farming. Yet confronted with such choice, discussions about ‘sustainable farming’ are often boiled down to two-sided debates. Organic or conventional, till or don’t till, meat or no meat, land-share or land-spare… the list goes on. These discussions often lead to polarisation, each camp seeking to claim they have *the* answer to overcome a specific global challenge. However, in doing so we neglect to realise that global challenges need local action, and for such action to be sustainable it must be contextualised within local ecological, social, economic and political possibilities. Such contextualisation demands a diversity of approaches! As many farmers shared at ORFC, what works on one farm won’t necessarily work on another.

Here at FarmED we embrace and celebrate a diversity of people and their approaches to farming and food system transformation. We hope we can enable you to make the best decisions for your farm, plot or community.

Resilient systems are built on networks

The importance of networks arose in almost every session we attended at ORFC.

Soil Networks

The more connected pores are in soil aggregates the more our soils can hold water and nutrients. The soil food web, many parts of which create these pores, is also a network, and the stronger this network is the more resilient our soils become in the face of extreme weather. Mycorrhizal relations between fungi and plants were a popular topic in the ORFC chatbox and offer a particularly good example of networks connecting life above and below the ground. Merlin Sheldrake spoke eloquently about the long history of these relationships and reminded us that life would simply be unrecognisable if these networks had never been formed.

Networks Within Farms

Sessions on agroecological and diverse farming systems reminded us of the need to see farms as ‘whole’ entities - networks of interconnected parts that, if tended well, can work harmoniously to nourish people and the planet. Regenerative farmer Rebecca Hoskin called to our attention the language we use to describe the relationship we have with nature. She highlighted how we often use language of dominance or coercion as if we are separate from these networks, and argued for the need to speak instead of humans 'cohabiting’ within these networks.

Networks Between Farms

The resilience of a farm depends not only on the networks found within it, but also on wider networks in which it is nested. Nigel Adams spoke about the UK’s 500,000 km of hedgerows, many of which act as ecological corridors for wildlife to migrate between different farms. Sadly this number is declining and becoming more fragmented at precisely when we need more connectivity. The importance of farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange networks also rang true in many sessions. These formal and informal networks not only support farmers to learn and innovate, but as farmers Clive Bailye and Joe Wookey shared with us, they also provide communities for farmers to build collective resilience for rising to the challenges they face on a daily basis. Farmer collaboration, particularly between livestock and arable farmers was also highlighted as a useful strategy for building farm resilience.

Food Citizen Networks

In its most simple sense the food system is a network, yet our current system disconnects two of its most fundamental characters - those who grow food and those who buy it. The global pandemic has shined a light on the cracks in this system, and through these cracks new networks are emerging such as Community Supported Agriculture schemes, and more recently Community Supported Agroforestry. Events such as ORFC are further connecting these disparate groups to share knowledge and help people find the role they can play in transforming the food system. The social movements that for years have been calling for agroecological food systems also bring together farmers and other food citizens. Thankfully it appears that these movements are beginning to influence policy makers, although many of us wait to see to what extent schemes like ELMS in the UK will support agroecological farming.

The Soil Health and Gut Health Network

We, and others, explored the relationship between soil health and gut health. There is still a lot to learn but the evidence is becoming clear - by building fully functioning soils we get better plant and animal health, and more nutrient dense food. Moreover, as agro-ecological, regenerative and pasture-fed systems rely on diverse cropping and stocking, we naturally produce a bigger range of fresh nutritious products to feed our communities with. The key to unlocking the full potential of these systems wiill be in developing enhanced routes to market and local networks that connect farms, abattoir, butchers, processors, millers, bakers, retailers, restaurants and the people they serve.

Each of these networks reminds us that everything we experience in the world is interconnected. The

decisions we make whether they are in a tractor or at a farm table all have an impact. Luckily what's good for the soil and for wildlife, is often good for us too. At FarmED we aim to support the nurturing of networks - physical and social, so come and join us!

The transformation of food systems requires knowledge *and* imagination!

Many farmers at ORFC highlighted the limited availability of training and knowledge resources available to them for implementing new farming practices to become more 'nature-friendly'. While online platforms such as Agricology and field-based networks such as the Soil Association's Innovative Farmers Field Labs are bringing farmers together to learn from each other, many farmers are learning as they go through experimentation and adaptation on their farms.

However, perhaps one of the most important messages shared at ORFC this year was the importance of using our imagination to envisage the future we want to build. We can have all of the knowledge in the world, but as Rob Hopkins shared, "we can't build what we can't imagine". Using our imagination opens our minds to new possibilities, it allows us to question assumptions and rules through which we manage our farms, run our businesses, distribute funding, or feed our families. Frances Moore Lappe echoed Rob's message in sharing, "it's not possible to know what's possible, so we are free… free to go for the world we want!". Yet opportunities for using our imagination are scarce and often available only to a privileged few.

Here at FarmED we're on a mission to help fill these knowledge gaps by integrating farmer knowledge with the latest developments in agroecological research. We want to make sure our courses and events are available to anyone to ensure we're all given the opportunity to learn and envisage the future we wish to create - if you eat, you're in!

We are currently developing a range of new courses and events that reflect this year's learning from ORFC so take a look at *The FarmED Programme* and what's coming up on our events page. We are thrilled to be hosting ORFC in the Field this summer - the next batch of tickets and revised programme will be launched soon.

So here's to another fantastic Oxford Real Farming Conference. Thank you to the organisers, volunteers, speakers and audience! We're leaving this one with more questions than answers, and we hope you are too!

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