

Research Project: Sustainable Food Systems – Alternative Food Systems and Local Economies.

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Background: How food is produced and consumed is one of the most significant determinants of the sustainability of any society and economy, and is also crucial for the sustainability of many rural communities and ecosystems. At the macro-level, the debate about the future of food systems is evolving into a contest between two paradigms (see A10 below for details), one based on the use of bio-technology and further intensification to make conventional systems more efficient and productive, and the other that seeks to develop alternative systems that achieve greater sustainability in other ways. BRASS research has investigated a range of alternative food production and consumption systems and their implications for local rural communities and urban areas.

Aims & objectives: The research into alternative food systems sought to:

- Understand the nature of alternative food systems their relationship to local economies and more mainstream production and consumption systems;
- Analyse successful practical examples and their potential for development and replication;
- Assess the potential of particular alternative systems to meet policy needs for more sustainable food systems and to foster successful rural economies and communities whilst also generating commercial success.
- Engage key stakeholders including regulators, planners, producers and consumers in exploring new visions of food systems and their roles and responsibilities within them.

About the research: BRASS research has investigated a number of aspects of the emerging alternative food systems agenda including:

- **Organic food systems:** One of the earliest strands of BRASS work when the Centre was established was the commissioning of a ‘state of the art’ review of organic and agroecological farming systems as an alternative approach to the increasing bio-technical transformation of agriculture. At the time research on organic farming methods was recognised as being comparatively diffuse and under-developed. The resulting book drew together a range of international case studies to identify new types of systems that may have the potential to be developed and replicated. This was followed by work investigating the potential limits to the development of an organic sector using Wales as a case study. BRASS also undertook a study looking at how family farmers learn about and develop organic techniques and how they relate to the organic movement as a whole and to their conventional counterpart. This study used a Community of Practice (CoP) framework to explore social learning in agriculture.
- **Urban agri-food systems:** This has included a PhD study on urban orchards as a component of an urban agri-food system and Prof Kevin Morgan’s contributions to the Sustainable Food Planning Group of the Assoc of European Schools of Planning (AESOP). This led to a Cardiff conference and a published volume on *Sustainable Food Planning: Evolving Theory & Practice* (Viljoen and Wiskerke, eds. 2012) and contributions to the Bristol Food Policy Council.
- **Food hubs and local food systems:** Food Hubs which coordinate the supply of food products from dispersed small producers to end customers represent an emerging but under-researched form of ‘alternative’ network. They appear to offer potential socio-ecological benefits, and the ability to address consumer concerns about the food provenance, small producers’ search for secure value-added markets, and regulator/policy maker needs to address health, environmental & economic challenges. BRASS work led to a report being developed for Welsh Government on food hubs. Farmers markets as a type of local food system were the focus of a PhD.

- Multi-functional agriculture: Another potential strategy for improving the sustainability of agriculture from a social and economic perspective is enhancing rural community livelihoods through the development of multi-functionality. BRASS engaged in both a policy analysis of the prospects for greater multi-functionality in the UK, and a case study based on integrating elements of the leisure economy with agriculture.

Results and outputs: BRASS's work on alternative food systems has shown the need for a much more nuanced and complex understanding of the relationships between conventional and alternative food chains—and, by extension, of their implications for rural development. The two are not separate (as often implied in research and policy) but interact and compete (often in ways that reveal significant power imbalances that have implications for rural development). The work on multi-functionality revealed that government policy in the UK has struggled to turn multifunctional activities into a real rural development option and that more innovative measures are needed to create new and more spatially embedded forms of supply and demand management in agri-food.

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Impacts achieved/potential for impact: Prof Kevin Morgan and Dr Roberta Sonnino received the ESRC impact award for policy impact on their School meals work. Profs Marsden and Lee are advisors for the Sustainable Development Welsh Assembly Committee; and Prof Marsden is a regular presenter to the All Parliamentary Committee for Agro-ecology, Westminster, and the All Party Committee for Rural Affairs, Welsh Assembly. The food hubs report fed directly into Welsh policy making, and the work on urban agri-food systems and farmer's markets both have relevance for food policy and commercial practice. Prof Morgan has also worked directly on food networks with Danish Technology Institute, Scottish Enterprise, SPRI (Basque regional development agency), the Turin Chamber of Commerce, and the US Office of Technology Assessment.