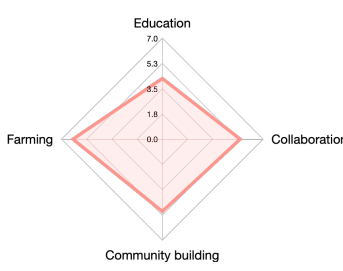


Appendix 9: England (NE2)

Organising partner:	Shared Assets	Innovation Type 
Practice:	Farms with strong citizen participation (Netherlands/Belgium, NL_BE3A)	
Practice context:	Netherlands and Belgium (NUTS 0) - Predominantly urban	
Confrontation context:	NUTS (0-1) England - - Predominantly urban	
Workshop location:	Online	
Date:	November 4th 2021	

Summary

In November 2021, Shared Assets held an online event with the Landworkers' Alliance attended by around 16 people to discuss whether the 'Herenboeren' model of community farms from the Netherlands (as researched and presented by Dr Marjolein Spaans from Technische Universiteit Delft) could also be useful in England, particularly for supporting new entrants into agriculture. Both the break-out room 'brainstorming' and the main room 'focus group' sessions hosted lively discussions of the opportunities for and barriers to implementing such a model in the English context, as well as more general conversation about rural regeneration. Overall, participants thought that while the Herenboeren model was interesting, there would likely need to be adjustments in cost and structure for it to be applicable and accessible in England, but that there were potential ways to take it forwards if there was an enthusiastic and concerted effort to do so across the land and food movements.

Context

We chose to confront the Herenboeren practice from The Netherlands with the English context due to a number of similarities between these countries. Both areas have similar demographic profiles, with ageing populations (Lewis, Barton and Cromarty, 2021, Statista, 2018). This includes farmers - in England, around a third of all farm holders are over the typical retirement age of 65 years, and just 3% are under 35 years old (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs et al., 2021: 22), in the Netherlands, over 64% of all agricultural workers are aged 40 years and above (Eurostat, 2017).

The temperate, maritime climatic conditions of both countries are also comparable (Met Office, n.d., Wintle, 2021), particularly in the flatter East of England, which is the most geographically proximate to the Netherlands, meaning similar forms of agriculture are potentially possible, although in practice, there are differences in the main sorts of produce cultivated. Both countries have a relatively high proportion of agricultural land as a percentage of land area (54.11% in the Netherlands [World Bank, 2019], and 69.54% in England [calculated based on statistics from Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2021 and overall land area from WorldAtlas, 2021]), but horticultural production makes up a higher proportion of agriculture in the Netherlands (Eurostat, n.d.) than in England, where livestock and arable farming dominate (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2019). In the past, a higher proportion of fruit and vegetables consumed in England were produced here, and there is now increased interest in reviving this sector due to the experience of food shortages during the early COVID-19 pandemic (Wheeler, 2020), and the ongoing climate impact of importing so much food (Wong, 2016).

In both countries, intensive, industrial, export-oriented agriculture is now the norm - with just 2.6% of England farmed organically and only 3.7% of the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2019). However, movements for smaller scale, agroecological practices which supply local communities also exist, supported by groups such as the respective national organisations for Community Supported Agriculture, and there is considerable interest from younger people in entering this sort of farming (Oppedijk van Veen et al., 2019, The Landworkers' Alliance, 2020). In both countries though, high land prices make starting out in farming difficult for new entrants. In the Netherlands, due to its smaller and more densely populated land area, average price per hectare is very high at €69,632 (Eurostat, 2021), whilst in England it is still high at an average of £17,287 per hectare for the equivalent time period (Knight Frank, 2021).

Although the Dutch new entrants 'promising practice' research for Ruralization under WP5 concentrated on the Herenboeren model in a particular municipality - Weert - where a Herenboeren farm had been established, and the equivalent UK research looked at the Farmstart Network across England, Scotland and Wales, for the confrontation activity we chose to focus on the English and Dutch contexts at a national scale, since in each country this is the level at which we felt the essential infrastructure might need to be developed in order for the Herenboeren model to function. In the Netherlands, the national Herenboeren organisation is responsible for training and employing the farmers, supporting with farm set-up (including issues such as insurance and land leasing), and also undertakes research and communications work, funded by an annual service fee paid to them by the member farms (Herenboeren, n.d.). In England currently, there are some organisations (such as the CSA Network, Landworkers' Alliance, or the Ecological Land Cooperative) which contain elements of, or have similar aims to, the Herenboeren approach, but we were interested in seeing what more could be learned from this Dutch model to support new entrants and community farms in England. In particular, regarding the Herenboeren farms' aim of meeting 60% of household food needs (Spaans, 2021), we were interested in what a similar approach here might mean in terms of boosting local economies and resilience, improving people's health, and strengthening their connection to farming and their food in rural and peri-urban areas.

Results

After presentations from the Landworkers' Alliance on their recent work on resilient local food systems, and Dr Spaans on the Dutch case study of the Herenboeren model, there was a question and answer session to begin the discussion. This was helpful as it highlighted what was clear or needed more explanation for participants. We then moved into four break-out rooms to allow everyone a good amount of time to speak. The following questions were given as prompts to guide the brainstorming discussions:

- What opportunities are there for this sort of model happening in England? Would it be useful here, especially to support new entrants in farming?
- What might some of the barriers be? How could these be overcome? Who would need to be involved?

After the brainstorming sessions and some reflections on these, we moved into the focus group discussion with all the participants in one (digital) room. The results of the event discussions as a whole are summarised in the sections below.

Acceptance and interest in implementing the practice

There was considerable interest in implementing the Herenboeren model, illustrated in the number of people who signed up for the event (close to 50) and the enthusiasm of the participants who turned up on the day of the discussions. Participants recognised the similar demographic context in England to the Netherlands, with lots of people living relatively near farmland, potentially meaning that such a model could work here. Attendees also noted the similarities in some elements of models already in place in England to the presented model. For example, the Ecological Land Cooperative seeks to buy land and offer long term leases to small-scale agroecological farmers (Ecological Land Cooperative, n.d.), and the CSA Network UK supports a range of models of community involvement in farming (CSA Network UK, 2021). Neither of these organisations have the full structure or exact objectives of the Herenboeren model, but awareness amongst participants of how these existing organisations work in England meant there was a general level of acceptance of the practice presented.

Critical factors for and barriers to implementing the innovative practice in England

A key barrier to implementation of the Herenboeren model in England highlighted by participants was the cost of becoming a cooperative member, stated to be €2000 for a household or €1000 for a single person. It was thought that another model of funding the start-up expenses could be needed as many people would struggle to put in this amount of money up front, meaning participation in the model would be inaccessible for most people.

Access to land, particularly the 20 hectares suggested as needed in the Herenboeren model, was also noted as a major barrier. Participants said that while there is a perception that land and housing is easier to come by in some parts of the country, such as the North, it is still expensive and difficult to access there, sometimes driven by demand for second/holiday homes purchased by more affluent people who mainly

live in major cities (a trend which has seemingly intensified during the pandemic) (Angeles Fitton, 2021). Securing land for a suitable length of time for long-term agroecological techniques such as agroforestry, or achieving the desired biodiversity outcomes were suggested as making access to land even more challenging.

Another barrier to the implementation of the Herenboeren model in England was around transport. Due to the different complexity of terrain and elevation in some parts of England, compared to the flatter Netherlands, and the potentially greater distances between settlements in England as a larger land mass, participants thought people might have to travel further to pick up their produce shares and wouldn't necessarily be able to cycle as recommended.

Measures to overcome barriers and actors who need to be involved to ensure success

One measure that participants came up with to help overcome the cost barrier for cooperative membership was to seek out external funding. In the Herenboeren model no grants or other outside funding is sought as the shares are designed to be enough to cover all set-up costs. While this is potentially good in terms of sustainability, seeking grants or other sources of funding to subsidise or replace shares was suggested in an English context to be a way to open up the model to people with a range of income levels. One way to do this suggested by participants was through a 'paying it forward' or 'solidarity' approach, where people who can afford to pay extra for their shares do so, so that a cheaper price can be paid by less affluent co-op members.

There was a strong feeling in the discussions that not only do the demographics of the cooperative members matter, but those of the farmers themselves too. Participants thought cultivating opportunities to support people of all ages, ethnicities and experience levels to participate in learning to farm was vital. This might need to be proactively considered during recruitment processes and training programmes organised at the national level, as, for example, currently farming is the least ethnically diverse sector in the UK, with 98.6% of farm managers and owners identifying as White British (Asgarian, 2020), and specific action is needed to address this and other aspects of structural inequality within the farming industry.

Engaging with planning professionals and policy at national and local levels was also thought to be essential by participants to overcome some barriers and ensure success. For example, areas designated as 'Green Belt', where construction is limited to restrict urban sprawl and protect the countryside (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2012) can be hard to get planning permission on for farm infrastructure or accommodation for farmers, which participants felt was critical to have in place. Although buildings for agricultural purposes should be allowed within the Green Belt (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2012), in practice planning permission for these structures can be difficult to secure. From Shared Assets' experience, people can get into a 'catch-22' situation where their planning application can be rejected if no evidence of agricultural activities can be provided for the

site, but these farming activities are hard to initiate without the construction of infrastructure, which requires planning permission.

Engaging with existing landowners was also thought to be a potential route to overcome the issue of land access; some participants thought there were increasingly large numbers of landowners interested in making some land available for community farming initiatives. Participants also thought 20 hectares was quite a large amount of land for a community farm, and perhaps by seeking smaller amounts of land (for example as part of another estate) there might be more opportunities to establish such projects.

Finally, due to the current lack of an equivalent umbrella structure for community led farms in England, participants also felt that setting up a national body (similar to the Herenboeren national organisation), but perhaps also more focused on land acquisition, was important. However, participants thought having regional and local structures as well as one central national body would be helpful in maximising democratic participation within the organisation, increasing collaboration and flexibility, and ensuring credibility amongst local communities and with funders.

Further ideas to foster rural regeneration in the English context

The event discussion naturally broadened into a wider one about how to foster rural regeneration and development in England. Participants suggested a number of ideas to further these processes.

Firstly, participants suggested it would be useful to have more guidance available for business planning for agroecological and community farm initiatives, so people interested in setting these up wouldn't have to start from scratch each time, but could have templates to draw on and adapt. These documents might include information on topics such as set-up costs and understanding potential markets, amongst other things. This might be something a Herenboeren national or regional-style organisation could research and put together to support farms to set up in a particular area, in addition to providing more tailored one-to-one advice where needed.

Secondly, and related to the work Shared Assets and partners are undertaking on council farmland (partly under WP6 of Ruralization), event participants raised the issue of how to gain access to more council land. At the moment, only a relatively small number of opportunities to take on individual farming tenancies come up each year on this land, and many councils have sold off, or are considering selling off, large portions, if not their entire farmland estates due to budgetary pressures (Graham et al., 2019). However, if different, potentially more collective or cooperative approaches to tenancies, and a more holistic purpose of council farmland could be considered, this public asset could offer land access opportunities for many more people, whilst also meeting council objectives. This might include access for Farmstarts (indicated by participants as something they would be interested in setting up) and for community farms in the vein of the Herenboeren model, but also for a much wider public to have a connection with their local farmland and where their food comes from, and experience the health benefits of more time spent in green and natural spaces, and locally produced, organic food. Part of this might also be space for cultural events which participants felt were important for bringing people together and helping build relationships, as an element of rural regeneration.

The specific power dynamics in rural areas where agroecological farms might want to set up would also need to be taken into account. In the Dutch example, the Weert farm had not yet been able to include livestock as part of the farm due to concerns about this from neighbours, and event participants mentioned that more affluent rural residents in England also often don't want the infrastructure associated with organic farming near their homes. The question of how to productively challenge ideas of the countryside as purely a space of recreation, and the particular aesthetics which come along with these, needs to be addressed as part of rural regeneration, so that rural/peri-urban areas can also be recognised as working environments, especially for small-scale farms which often seek to attract a local customer base to reduce food miles.

Another issue raised by participants, related to the previous one, was around accommodation for farmers. In the Dutch model, having a place for farmers to live on site wasn't a prerequisite of the land acquired, and in the Weert example, the farmers lived on site at first, but more recently two young people in tiny houses had played a concierge role for visitors, whilst the main farmers lived elsewhere. Participants in the event felt the issue of providing adequate accommodation for farmers and their families on site should be seen as a priority, not an optional extra. As mentioned above, restrictive planning frameworks in rural areas of England can mean building a farmhouse or other essential infrastructure for a working farm on agricultural land is very difficult. Participants felt tackling this issue was critical, not only for setting up community farms, but to nurture the regeneration of rural areas more generally, so living there is more affordable. They also mentioned examples of how providing more affordable rural housing for communities has been facilitated in other contexts without compromising the natural environment, such as through the One Planet Development planning policy in place in Wales (One Planet Council, n.d.), which participants thought we should look to replicate in England.

Lessons learned from the practice

Through the event, it was useful to understand more about the interaction between the local farms and the national Herenboeren organisation, particularly around issues such as land access and funding. Learning about the toolbox for the whole process of setting up a farm, from the initial idea, to community organising, design, finding land and farmers, and eventually managing it as a cooperative on a day to day basis, was also very useful, as often various aspects of this lengthy timeline of actions are hard to find out about. In addition, participants were curious regarding details around the share structure, whether shares could be transferred, and if there was any biodiversity monitoring going on in the farms. Not all of these issues had yet been encountered in the Dutch case study practice as the farm was set up relatively recently, but they pose interesting questions for the future, both in the Netherlands and were a similar model to be set up in England.

Most aspects of the practice presented are probably applicable in a general sense in England, given the similar circumstances in the Netherlands and England, as outlined above, such as the movement for more

local, agroecologically produced food, and the potential for comparable types of agriculture in some parts of England to the Netherlands. However, there are undoubtedly different policy and legal frameworks specific to each country which would need to be looked into in more depth and adapted to if a model equivalent to the Herenboeren was to be established in England. This is because these would likely have an impact on things like land leases, funding, the governance structure of the farms and their wider national network. Participants also noted that a similar approach in England might work better if it was slightly less prescriptive and/or 'top-down', but that taking the broad principles and adapting them could be possible.

Participants in the event also mentioned several additional issues which would need to be taken into consideration were the Herenboeren model to be successfully initiated in England, as well as being relevant to promoting rural regeneration more generally. One of these issues raised by participants and not yet mentioned in this report, was around the prevalence of unpaid work in the agroecological sector in England, which they felt needs to be addressed. In England, many routes into agroecological farming rely upon people's ability to undertake voluntary traineeships or work on farms without compensation, meaning these pathways are inaccessible to people with less financial security, and ultimately results in less diversity in the agroecological farming sector. Whilst in the Herenboeren model, the main farmer(s) is/are employed and thus paid reasonably well, as well as being eligible for sick leave, holiday and so on, it would still remain important to consider the role of volunteers in the model, and whether this is appropriate, or if Herenboeren farms could find other ways to support more new entrants into farming, for example by offering paid traineeships or free horticultural courses through educational institutions (as suggested in Shared Assets' WP5 Farmstart Network promising practice case study research).

Taking things forward

In order to take forward the Herenboeren model in England, there would likely need to be a two-pronged approach. First of all, existing organisations and stakeholders interested in promoting agroecological food and farming would need to come together to work out what suitable national and local structures might look like in England, what adaptations (e.g. around funding or governance) might be desired, and what a way forward to potentially create a new organisation to manage these community farms, without duplicating the work of existing groups, would be.

Secondly, there would probably need to be a concerted and joined up effort from across the agroecological food and farming movement to lobby for changes in the planning system and to create environmental and agricultural policy and subsidy frameworks which support and prioritise community farms at scale as opposed to industrial agriculture. This work is ongoing, for example through the recent DEFRA Environmental Land Management Scheme consultations and pilots (Landworkers' Alliance, 2021), and there is a need to build on this momentum. This more supportive environment could facilitate a paradigm shift in England, where agroecological, community-rooted farms are able to access the best land and not have to make do in the margins, or be reliant on philanthropy to produce good food which is accessible for everyone, as some event participants noted.

Whilst this will not be a quick process, there is clearly enthusiasm for this work; several participants in the event were interested in continuing the conversations around community farms and deepening the connections made with each other after the event had finished, and a Slack channel was set up as a first step to help facilitate this.

Contributors

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