

Scramble for Land: Fostering the Allies of Food Production Systems

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Food production is facing a bold challenge for its primary resource - Land. In Scotland, where this study is situated, food producing farmlands are increasingly being diverted for the production of a range of non-food products including bio-fuels, pharmaceutical crops and industrial fibre crops. Worryingly for the food sector, the trend for alternative land use aligns with declining economic returns from traditional food-producing agriculture and a trend for farmers to diversify as a means of bolstering ailing profits (average farm income is £45,000 and 9% fail to make a profit at all). It is also important to note that ongoing financial support to farmers, such as direct payments, to encourage food production systems have failed to curb the steady diversion of agricultural land for other uses.

This paper proposes that non-food diversion of agricultural lands can be stalled and possibly reversed by focussing on small farms and encouraging diversification within food production activities like specialist farming and value added activities. The majority of farm holdings are small, specialist businesses. Many small farms make little profit from core agriculture and are reliant on a range of diversification options to supplement farm income. However, their choice of diversification strategy has direct implications for our food production systems. The UK produces less than 60% of our food needs and further non-food cropping leaves us vulnerable to food security shocks.

We examine the motivations and competencies of small farmers who are diversified within value added and specialist food activities. We identify the factors that promote and impede these activities and the underlying competencies required to perform them. The results of this research are policy relevant in identifying structural interventions that sustain food production systems.