

COMMENTARY

‘Good farming’ in a polycrisis: What could arts-led research offer?

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Abstract

What does ‘good farming’ look like in a context of climatic, technological, socio-economic, regulatory, and geopolitical upheaval? In this commentary, we highlight the opportunities presented by arts-led research to complement the existing STEM-centric data by offering more inclusive, holistic, dialogical, and experiential understandings of contemporary agriculture. Creative methods offer diverse opportunities to engage with farmer voices, and ensure that policy-making successfully connects with its intended stakeholders, in contrast to the experiences of the Welsh Sustainable Farming Scheme. Through three brief examples of participatory arts, storytelling, and futuring, we highlight the importance of voicing silences, building trust, and enabling more culturally sustainable policies within contentious, complex and, emotive arenas such as environmental sustainability.

KEYWORDS

agriculture, creative methods, just transitions, participatory methods, sustainability, Wales

No Farmers. No Food. No Future.

This was the stark slogan of Welsh farmers and agricultural workers protesting the devolved Welsh administration's proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) in early 2024. While this has been echoed in related protests across the UK and Europe more widely, the Welsh protest specifically argued that the SFS – the delayed post-Brexit plan for agricultural funding – will harm both food security and the rural economy in Wales (Heron et al., 2024). Therefore, despite the Welsh government's progressive goals, set under its environmental and Future Generations agendas, to respond to the ‘polycrisis of health, poverty, nature and climate change’ (Welsh Government, 2023), its regulatory push for a ‘green transition’ is making a period of significant climatic, technological, socio-economic, and geopolitical upheaval for UK agriculture even more demanding. Farmers are forced into survivalist, adaptive strategies, with limited scope to develop alternative and forward-facing practices (Morris et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2024).

In this commentary, we propose that the current narrow and homogenising agricultural policy agenda is informed primarily by STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) research characterised by abstracted, siloed high-level datasets and large-scale studies, such as the Farm Business Survey. While STEM approaches are interdisciplinary (Kehler, 2024), we argue that their exclusive use by policy-makers fails to fully capture the lived experience of farmers.

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Including creative and arts-led social science research offers the possibility for more inclusive, holistic, values-centred, and dialogical understandings between farmers, the public, and the state. Critically, such methods are well suited to reveal the complex interplay of contextual, relational, and affective conditions that inform farmers' behaviours and decision-making. These methods are characterised by sustained engagement, exchange, co-design, and care; listening, empowering diverse and lay voices, peer-learning, and negotiating differences are central, building participants' own understanding, capacity, and buy-in for the research. Though more resource-heavy, such research offers an essential complement to existing STEM-informed work, to ensure policy-making is co-designed and successfully 'lands' with its intended stakeholders and beneficiaries. We demonstrate this through the contentious Welsh SFS case.

Today's farmers face significant challenges to maintain viable farm businesses at the same time as carrying societal responsibility for food security, environmental protection, and climate change (Burton et al., 2021, p. 158), but what does it mean to be a 'good farmer' in this highly dynamic and contested context? Traditionally, 'good farming' as understood by farmers required a visual display of farming skills, which materialised in an orderly, clean, and productive landscape (Herman, 2015). Burton et al. (2021, p. 157) reflect, however, that 'the good farmer is constantly adapting to changing technologies, broader expectations for social behaviour and changing expectations for the role of agriculture in society'. In the UK, the post-Brexit agricultural transition has changed state expectations of the farming sector to explicitly incorporate the provision of public goods as well as food (Cusworth & Dodsworth, 2021). For the Welsh Government (2024), good farming is grounded in ideals of food production, sustainability, ecosystem resilience, and the countryside as a cultural and common good. However, ultimately, the disconnect between homogenising top-down regulations that push standardised, 'by the calendar' farming activities and the accumulated, practice-based and localised knowledges informing farm-level responsive practices makes it challenging to be a 'good farmer' in both the farmer's own, and the state's, estimation (Walton et al., 2024).

Farm-sector responses to SFS consultations showed clear frustration that environmental goals seemingly took prominence over stable and equitable food production, with concerns raised that SFS woodland and habitat requirements would significantly decrease the amount of productive agricultural land available (Heron et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this is not to say that farmers are against greater environmental sustainability; environmental proactivity is increasingly valued as the economic benefits and skills involved in agri-environment schemes become more recognised in the sector, and farmers assert that their views have been misrecognised in climate debates (Clifford & Travis, 2018; Walton et al., 2024). While farmers' local, situated knowledges might usefully inform transformational changes for the common good, they are limited to pragmatic, modifying practices in response to changing regulatory goals like SFS, alongside the race-to-the-bottom enforced by big retailers (Cusworth & Dodsworth, 2021). How, then, can we as researchers support the inclusion of farmers' situated knowledges in the environmental decision-making that impacts them?

We now move to reflect on the creative and arts-led research that we, as human geographers, could do to support holistic, place-based and farmer-led strategies for a just, sustainable transition. These methods draw out different ways of knowing: inclusively enabling stakeholders to communicate on their own terms; as empowering methods to articulate alternative futures; and as powerful tools to facilitate social change (Mannay, 2016; von Benzon, 2023). The following three examples of participatory arts, storytelling, and futuring powerfully highlight the opportunities presented by diverse creative methods to voice silences and build trust between communities through offering different routes for, in this case, farmers to express their experiences, concerns, and aspirations.

Jones (2022) reflects on the friction and mistrust between farmers and a landscape-scale rewilding project in the Cambrian Mountains. Through her practice-led research as an artist and farmer, she interweaves interviews, experimental imagery, documentary, autobiographical narrative, and performance art. These offer encounters with the lived, more-than-human narratives of care and complexity in the storied landscapes of Welsh upland sheep farming, which had been hidden by the reductive anthropocentric framing of farming by the rewilding project. Jones (2022) argues that artistic practices 'offer ways for a non-farmer to gain an experiential understanding of ... [an otherwise] inaccessible world', and so open up a space for more empathetic and collaborative dialogue between farmers, conservationists, and policy-makers.

Liguori et al. (2021) outline how community storytelling enabled farmers, community members, and policy-makers to discuss the contentious issue of water in the Cambridgeshire Fenlands. Storytelling removed barriers to dialogic deliberation, built community, and imagined alternative solutions. Storytelling 'questions the status quo. It tears down regimes of domination. It envisions possibilities for change' (Braniger et al., 2020, p. xi). Similarly, while less common in agricultural research, creative futuring methodologies such as speculative fiction and utopia sketching are increasingly used to explore community food futures. They encourage participants to step outside current limitations into an immersive, 'safe space' to explore desirable futures. Hebrok and Mainsah (2022) use 'Bird', an imagined high-tech food delivery service in the not-so-distant future, as a creative workshop stimulus. This allowed participants to reflect critically on

issues of power, ethics, and aesthetics in the context of sustainable food consumption, and researchers to move beyond incremental design improvements.

Creative and arts-led research offers an effective and inclusive tool for disseminating farmers' voices to broad audiences, as well as exciting opportunities to open reflexive dialogues with farmers and food-systems stakeholders around complex, emotive, and lived issues such as environmental sustainability. As such they are effective tools for influencing, changing, and communicating policy, for: framing, simplifying complex data, delivering key messages and behaviour change (McEwen et al., 2022). While they can strengthen the argument for new initiatives with time-poor, non-specialist policy-makers, McEwen et al. (2022) note that many decision-makers are resistant to anything other than scientific datasets. Perceptions that creative methods are parochial limit institutional openness to broadened understandings of 'evidence', failing to recognise the complementarity of 'objective' science and 'subjective' stories, which can be particularly effective in place-based policy at local/regional scales.

Therefore, incorporating creative methods create spaces to both engage with and step outside what can be a contested and conflictual reality. While there may be resistance, the diversity of creative methods offers multiple ways to develop collaborative conversations and promote narratives of change amongst both farmers and policy-makers. Greater understanding of how farmers negotiate competing expectations and identities would arguably enable more culturally sustainable policies (Burton et al., 2021). While particularly pertinent in the current Welsh context where environmental policies are in tension with 'good' farming, creative methods raise important questions for 'good farming' debates globally as they reveal the latter's implicit normativity through making space for the personal, the contextual, the lived, and the aspirational.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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