

Farming Transitions: Pathways Towards Regional Sustainability of Agriculture in Europe

The FarmPath Project

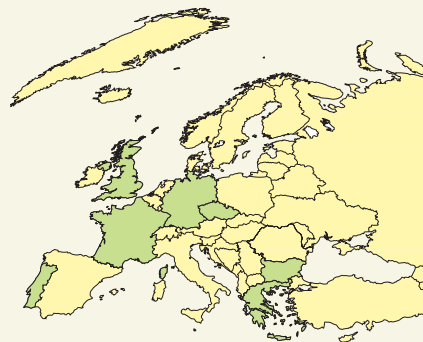
FarmPath is a three year collaborative research project funded through European Commission's 7th Framework Programme. FarmPath will run from March 2011 to February 2014. The overall goal of FarmPath is to identify and assess future transition pathways towards regional sustainability of agriculture in Europe, and the social and technological innovation needs required to initiate and progress along these pathways.

Why Study 'Regional Sustainability of Agriculture'?

Over the past decade the transition towards increased sustainability in agriculture has been a central theme in the work of governments, NGOs and research institutions. Numerous publications, including the European Commission White Paper on Adapting to Climate Change (2009) identify the importance of increasing sustainability of agriculture in order to meet future challenges. However, despite the adoption of the notion of sustainable development of agriculture as a basic EC policy principle, it is becoming increasingly clear that changes are needed to ensure that agriculture in the EU can meet the increasing range of public goods and functions desired by European citizens (e.g. safe and high quality food, renewable energy and fibre production, maintenance of the environment, viable rural communities, recreational and amenity landscapes). At the same time, European farmers are dealing with fluctuating commodity prices, a changing subsidy regime, disease risks and outbreaks, extreme weather events, and a perceived shortage of young people interested in becoming farmers.

In FarmPath, we propose that no single farm or farming system can or should be expected to meet the full range of public and industry demands on agriculture. Instead, we propose that

increasing sustainability of agriculture is best addressed by enabling flexible combinations of farming models. These models vary to reflect the specific opportunity sets embedded in regional culture, agricultural capability, diversification potential, ecology and historic ownership and governance structures. Of particular interest are the approaches to farming which most interest young people – we believe this is a key element in the social and economic sustainability of farming systems.



United Kingdom, Greece, Germany,
Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Portugal, France

What do we mean by 'Transition towards Sustainability'?

In FarmPath, sustainability of agricultural systems is defined as an ongoing, adaptive process of enabling farming households and members of the agricultural production and consumption chains to respond to the changing needs and preferences of consumers and citizens, through flexible combinations of farming models and provision of a suite of public goods and agricultural functions at regional level.

In order to move towards increased sustainability, transition needs to occur (Darnhofer et al., 2010). In FarmPath, transitions refer to important changes in functional systems (Kemp and Martens, 2007). They involve several sectors or sub-sectors as well as a range of societal actors at different scale levels. Through the interdependency and co-evolution of these, society or an important societal subsystem, fundamentally changes. A transition is thus qualitatively different from an incremental change that is limited in scope (e.g. does not affect a whole sector of the economy), in time (is only a fad and does not stabilise) or in space (only takes place in some region). Transitions are the result of long-term processes of fundamental change that incorporate processes of societal, ecological, economic, cultural, technological and institutional co-evolution (Loorbach and Frantzeskaki, 2009). For a transition to occur different developments at the local, regional and national level have to come together, causing a development pathway based on new practices, technologies, knowledge, institutions social organisation and different guiding principles and values.

To do justice to the complexity and multidimensional character of choices, the assessment of alternative options needs to be a participatory process (Scoones et al., 2007; Plummer, 2009). Indeed, the system that is deemed desirable and thus the objective of transition, will need to encompass

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different scales (of time and space), multiple dynamics and actors. Only through participatory processes is it possible to adequately address the legitimate multiple viewpoints as well as the uncertainty inherent in the alternative systems and alternative pathways to these systems (Darnhofer and Loibl, 2007). **An important step is thus to identify and assess future transition pathways, i.e. envisioning sustainable future trajectories.** We address this using transdisciplinary research, involving stakeholders directly in the research process.

FarmPath Study Countries FarmPath Activities

FarmPath research will be undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of sociologists, geographers and economists, working directly with regional and national stakeholders from seven EU countries.

- Develop a conceptual framework integrating transition management concepts with recent literature on agri-food regimes, resilience and farm-level transitions
- Undertake empirical research in seven European countries
- Study seven different clusters of case studies of changes to agricultural production or marketing practices which has been undertaken by a considerable number of farmers in a region in order to increase the economic, social and/or environmental sustainability of agriculture. These are: on-farm renewable energy production, countryside consumption, farmer collaboration, high nature value farming, reducing the environmental impact of

farming and alternative marketing channels.

- Regional identification of ideal 'transition pathways' for agriculture in one region of the seven study countries
- Research sub-focus on young farmers and new entrants
- Develop a handbook on 'regional sustainability of agriculture'
- Develop regional, national and European level policy recommendations
- Publish an academic book

Project Partners:

FarmPath is led by The James Hutton Institute, Scotland in partnership with the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria; the University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria; the Agricultural University of Athens, Greece; the Institute for Rural Development Research, Frankfurt, Germany; the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague; University of Plymouth, UK; University of Evora, Portugal, and the Institute for Life, Food and Horticultural Sciences and Landscaping, Rennes, France.

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