

NOTES FROM PLENARY SESSION 1

Wednesday 19 January 2005

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This session set the scene for the conference. It provided a context for the research programme in terms of the importance of research on the rural economy and land use to government, within an international context and to the public. It also provided an account of how the RELU programme was responding.

Opening the conference Lord Whitty, the minister with responsibility for farming, food and sustainable energy, explained how Defra policy reflected the changing demands on the rural economy and land use. It five strategic priorities included rural communities, the farming and food industries, resource protection and, production and consumption and climate change. The theme was sustainability. For this policy needed to be grounded in good evidence. The Department had published its science strategy in June 2003 and in 2004 taken this forward with work on horizon scanning and its publication on Evidence and Innovation. Research needed to provide an interdisciplinary basis for policy. The RELU programme, which Defra supported, was clearly relevant. Its major themes, integration of land and water, sustainable food chains, the environmental basis of rural development and social and economic interactions focused on issues that were an important part of the government's own agenda.

The Director of RELU, Professor Philip Lowe introduced the programme. He illustrated how it was stimulated by a range of public concerns including developments in the rural economy, in agriculture and a changing climate. It stemmed from public concerns about science, the belief it was out of touch with society, that it was not impartial and it gave confusing signals to the rest of the community. The RELU programme would emphasise both the need for interdisciplinary science and for science that was responsive to the needs and concerns of stakeholders. The concern for joined-up science had been a major consideration in programme setting, in its management, in the design of projects and in building capacity through individual development. The programme sought to secure social accountability through consultations and discussions with stakeholders at the outset, through their involvement in programme management and by challenging the perceived division of 'Science' and 'Society' that had diminished the value of earlier research work.

Professor Mike Bonell of UNESCO, who is Global Co-ordinator of the Hydrology for the Environment, Health and Policy (HELP), described how this programme operated in an area where interdisciplinarity was essential. It linked hydrology and society by taking a 'bottom up approach'. This had been difficult to achieve given the traditional division between scientists and water managers but he described how HELP had achieved successes through establishing Basin Groups. A global network of 67 basins had been in place from July 2004 and

these had held conferences and workshops engaging stakeholders. Many challenges remained, including the interface between water management, the law, policy and science. The outputs of RELU could become a major contribution to the HELP programme.

Deidre Hutton chairman of the National Consumer Council presented the final paper of the morning session. She highlighted the work of the NCC, its concerns about public health and nutrition and for sustainable consumption and production. From that perspective the Food Chain seems complicated, competitive, changing and highly regulated. What NCC looked for was high standards, a balance of interests among stakeholders, efficiency, dynamism, and an optimum level of regulation. They sought research that made a connection between sustainability and nutrition, could reveal the costs and benefits of the food chain, aided understanding of what works and why. RELU with its integrative approach and its concern for social accountability would clearly contribute to these goals.