

RES-224-25-0113, Dr C Twyman, University of Sheffield

25 Oct 04 – 24 Apr 05

Learning from the South: Livestock Farming in Stressed Environments (LIFE)

This study informs the RELU programme by setting and addressing a range of key questions concerning the transfer of experience of agricultural research and practice in Europe and developing areas to the UK. It is based on the premise that many 'process related' practices/approaches transcend different bio-physical (climate, ecology) contexts and by sharing experiences from different parts of the world, it could lead to new and creative ways of thinking about issues in the UK. This project aimed to facilitate a two-way learning process by stimulating a dialogue between researchers and practitioners in the UK, Europe and developing areas, to engender the transfer of ideas and 'ways of thinking' about common challenges within small-scale mixed farming in stressed environments. This also challenged conventional assumptions of one-way flows of information, aid and learning from the developed 'north' to the less developed 'south'. This was achieved through a two day workshop in February 2005, which brought together researchers, NGOs, farmer association representatives and policy makers. During this meeting, workshop participants evaluated the transferable components of 'process-related' best practice approaches, in order to put forward a question-setting agenda for identifying and progressing key issues in small-scale mixed farming in stressed environments.

Based on the analysis of the experiences of the workshop participants, there is increasing evidence of the gains to be made in looking more widely, to experiences and responses from different sectors of societies, and from different parts of the world. Harnessing this potential could lead to new and creative ways of thinking about issues within the UK and developed areas. The outcomes of the 2-day workshop demonstrate that placing the focus on understanding the 'process-related', rather than 'place-based' dimensions of best practices and experiences from elsewhere could have beneficial results for UK policy, planning and research. Despite identification of a number of mechanisms for such transfer, the knowledge transfer process is not straightforward, particularly given that the continuation of agriculture in the face of increasing stresses may not always be the optimum strategy. Further exploration is needed of the overall framework of the rural economy and the multi-functionality of agricultural systems. This includes broadening assessments away from focusing solely on food production.

Key mechanisms for knowledge transfer and learning need to be established, together with 'learning spaces' within and between research institutions, policymakers, NGOs and farming communities. We need to continue to ask how best to transfer knowledge, at what level this should take place and which types of knowledge are most effectively transferred. With further exploration of soft-systems approaches and reconsideration of the multi-dimensionality of power relations, experience sharing could, with time, lead to processes of knowledge transfer.