

Report (review) on Holly Barlow, *Devising a rural food system based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*, PhD thesis submitted to Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Faculty of Economics and Management, Department of Humanities, summer 2024.

### *The Dissertation.*

The dissertation adopts a conventional format structured around six sections: an introduction, a literature review, a discussion of the methodology used, the findings, a discussion and a conclusion.

Section One introduces three key themes central to the project: 1/ UK farming, its productivist past, its location in a food chain for unhealthy highly processed food dominated by supermarkets with negative impacts on biodiversity; 2/ the introduction of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the UK government's commitment to them; and 3/ the relative paucity of research on the 'lived experience' of UK farmers.

Section Two discusses a broad range of literature relevant to the following themes, all of them related to the three themes identified in the introduction: the CAP, failures of the current agricultural system (economic, environmental, social), rural development, the alternative agricultural movement, regenerative agriculture (principles, successes, criticism), principles and benefits of organic agriculture, challenges and delivery of the sustainable development goals and the lived experience of farmers, growers and food producers.

Section Three presents the two main methodologies used: the survey and the interviews.

Section Four presents, first, the findings of the survey and then, at much greater length, those of the interviews. The latter is packed with illustrative and illuminating quotations. The areas covered by the interviews are: subsidies, future policy, crop production, future farming methods, greenhouse production, food standards and imports, supply chain issues and solutions, consumer issues and solutions, the labour market and solutions and the COVID pandemic. The interviews also provide commentary on economic, social and environmental barriers experience by the farmers.

Section Five makes links between the findings (mainly from the interviews), sections of the literature discussed in the literature review and the overall goals of the thesis presented in the introduction.

Section Six concludes by reprising the research goals and summarizing the findings.

### *Strengths of the Dissertation*

1/ The thesis achieves its goals in that it demonstrates how the lived experience of English farmers at a time of crisis and policy change in UK farming is pushing some to adopt agro-environmental and other strategies which are compatible with Mazzucato's programme for mission-oriented policies for achieving sustainable development goals.

2/ In the process, she has produced a wonderful selection of interviews which reveal a great deal about the thinking of English farmers facing climate change and policy change across multiple dimensions.

3/ She has a good grasp of the wide variety of literatures relevant to her project and the problems that they discuss.

4/ She situates the position of English agriculture well – predominantly productivist, struggling to compete on world market, only producing around 50% of UK farm needs, suffering from rising land prices, an ageing population and the dominance of supermarkets.

5/ She is to be congratulated on succeeding to complete a research project during the period of COVID.

### *Weaknesses of the Dissertation*

There are a number of issues that might be grouped within the category of insufficiently sharp focus.

1/ The research goals could have been formulated more precisely, identifying more explicitly links between ‘lived experience’ of farmers, agro-environmental goals in both the CAP and the English ELMS and the links of these to sustainable development goals. For example, on p.23 she says of organic farming and regenerative agriculture that, ‘This set of alternative principles is the focus of this thesis...’, but the statement is left hanging somewhat and the link to sustainable development goals not specified.

2/ It was a little unclear where the third element in the research, the discourse analysis of UK agricultural policy, took place. UK agricultural policy is discussed and criticised but there is no separately identifiable section for discourse analysis.

3/ There are some apparent ambiguities in various statements on the objectives of the research. On p.40 she says, ‘the focus of this research is to address the consequences of the CAP on the English farming sector’, but in the Introduction, p.10, her focus is on the fact that, ‘With the UK Government’s commitment to the SGDs coupled with Britain’s exit from the European Union, there is an exciting opportunity to redevelop agricultural policy with a more sustainable focus.’ On p.42, on the other hand, she states, ‘The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experience of farmers and growers in England who are dealing with the implications of agricultural policy and the challenges of sustainability.’

4/ Although the candidate is well informed about the contents of the literature, her discussion could have had a sharper critical edge.

5/ We are told the gender composition of survey responders but not of the individual interviewees.

6/ There are references in the interviews which might be explained for the non-UK audience. For example, p. 66, who was George Eustice? (Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs from 13 February 2020 to 6 September 2022), and, p.54, what are ‘smarties’ (a type of sweet for children)?

7/ There are places where value-judgements appear to slip in: p. 62 ‘there is a desperate need for change in the form of more regenerative farming’; p.64 ‘This is an excellent example ...’

8/ It could have been made clearer what was meant by ‘lived experience’, with somewhat more identification of ‘lived experience’ elements in the interviews. The relevance to trolling (p.90) was shocking, but there were probably more, less extreme, examples.

9/ There are a great many typing and some spelling errors.

Although more weaknesses (9) have been identified than strengths (5), quantity is not the same as quality. The severity of the weaknesses is minor: they are far outweighed by the quality of the strengths.

#### *Questions to the candidate*

1/ Do you think that being obliged to conduct telephone-only interviews worked in your favour? The respondents are remarkably uninhibited. Was this perhaps because of the relative anonymity of conversations held over the phone?

2/ You decided not to use qualitative software for analysing results, why was that?

3/ Why did you choose to focus on sustainable development goals rather than agro-environmental ones around which the CAP and ELMS are structured?

4/ You correctly identify the attraction of short supply chains and traditional farming methods to core interviewees, but other farmers are clearly attracted by robotics, drones, cameras and so on. Can you comment on this apparent contradiction? Is it in fact a contradiction?

#### *Overall*

I recommend the thesis for the defence and after successful defence in front of the committee I agree with awarding an academic Ph.D. (in Czech doktor) to Holly Barlow.

#### *Further Journal Publication*

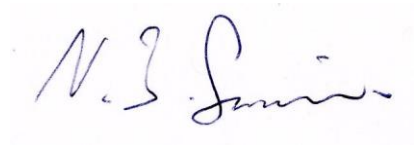
The candidate has already produced a publication (with Professor Lošťák) in the *Journal of Rural Studies* (102 (2023) 103103) which focused on horticulture and supply-chain issues. There is scope, I think, for at least one more article from the dissertation, and one that focuses on its major argument on farmer everyday experience and sustainable development goals, or perhaps more narrowly agro-environmental policies. For this the candidate might consider re-orienting the argument a little along the following lines.

1/ Revise the characterisation of the context in which the research took place. On pp.9-10, the argument is that UK adoption of SDGs coincides with BREXIT and therefore produces an 'exciting opportunity'; but actual policy remains unclear. The implication is that the 'exciting opportunity' is for policy makers. But this 'exciting opportunity' was not in fact grasped by English policy makers, as the dissertation makes clear. Nevertheless, BREXIT, in conjunction with media attention to climate change and the SDGs in the background taken together with the incomplete ELMS, forced farmers to think about these issues in a way that they probably had not before. What was created was not so much an 'exciting opportunity' for policy makers, as a specific conjuncture, an accidentally created ideal moment, when alternative approaches to agriculture were in the forefront of farmers' minds. The candidate captured that moment and has made great use of it.

2/ The article could make more of the survey results and the ambiguities within them. When addressed in the abstract, there is relative ignorance of SDGs (only 52% of respondents were aware of them). But the interviews suggest that when asked about more concrete situations, SDG-compatible positions come forward, and this is also reflected in the responses to specific questions about Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure reported on p.48 which show, 'a social interest from farmers, food producers and growers to promote good health and wellbeing of society, there is a clear awareness for the need for health improvements of the English society a fundamental aspect of which, is course based on diet. The results from this

question also showed that FPGs had keen interest in climate issues, this was strongly emphasised in the interview phase of the research, many FPGs taking strong actions to improve business practices for the environmental good ...' The ambiguities in the survey findings could be highlighted in addition to reinforcing similar findings in the two stages of the research.

3/ For a journal article it might be safer simply to focus on the attractiveness of agro-environmental policies to English farmers at a time of crisis because there is unambiguous research evidence for this. There would be space in the conclusion to propose further that these are compatible with, for example, Mazzucato's mission-oriented policy for SDGs.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. J. Swain', written on a light-colored background.

Nigel Swain, MA, PhD (Cantab)  
5 June, 2024.