The use of case studies in researching the conversion to organic farming systems

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ABSTRACT

This poster reviews the use of case studies in studying farms converting to organic production. Particular reference is made to the 'Conversion to organic field vegetable production' project, which is making use of case studies. Case studies facilitate an in depth analysis of a farm during the conversion to organic production and enable researchers and farmers to gain a greater understanding of the complex changes that take place. Case studies also provide a valuable tool for disseminating the results.

Keywords: case studies; organic field vegetables

APPROACHES

Case studies are an in depth analysis (usually carried out over a number of years) that contain data collected on working farms with the aim of forming an understanding of different farming systems. The criteria for adopting the case-study approach has been documented in Lampkin & Padel (1994). These include the advantages that case studies provide real data and thus enable researchers, advisors and farmers to understand the decision-making processes and factors that contribute to the successes or failures of the farm. They also provide ideal opportunities for the dissemination of information either through on-farm open days or through written material. Disadvantages of the case study approach are that statistical analysis is difficult and generalisations become problematic, as all farms are unique.

Case studies have been a useful way of helping to understand and convey the complexities and diversity of organic farming systems. This approach has been used in European studies investigating the conversion to organic farming systems (Lampkin & Padel, 1994). Recent UK studies looking at the conversion to organic arable (Cormack & Elliot, 2001), organic milk (Haggar & Padel, 1996) and organic sheep and beef farming systems (Keatinge & Elliot, 1996) have made detailed studies of one main site and supplemented this with data from several 'link' or 'reference farms'. This has enabled comparisons of the physical and financial performance of the farm's performance to be made over several years.

THE CONVERSION TO ORGANIC FIELD VEGETABLE PRODUCTION PROJECT

In the HDRA-led project 'Conversion to organic field vegetable production' a similar approach to that used in previous studies has been used. Data has been collected from one main site and from ten commercial reference farms since 1996. Data is collected on the agronomic and economic performance of the farms throughout the conversion period and the first fully organic rotation. Information gathered also documents each farmer's approach to conversion and the management strategies used during and following conversion. The main site has been used for more detailed experimentation and monitoring. Results from the main site have been compared with the reference farms and with conventional and established organic vegetable systems (HDRA, 2001).

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

As the study has progressed the multidisciplinary team of researchers involved in the project have come to appreciate the diverse nature of each farm and the difficulties of making generalisations based on averages from all farms. Therefore it has been decided to make increasing use of the case studies to document, analyse and disseminate the results. Each farm is being written up as a case study and these will be disseminated through discussions with advisors, open days, leaflets and the HDRA website. This should enable farmers to have better access to relevant results and consequently to be able to make more informed decisions as to whether and how to convert to organic production.

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