

SUREFARM - Towards SUsustainable and REsilient EU FARMing systems

Modern agricultural systems develop in the face of changes at both a global and national level. While arable farming is a highly competitive and strategic sector of UK agriculture, it has to deal with and respond to a range of global challenges such as climate change and the imperative to reduce its carbon footprint, the price volatility of a globalised food system, extreme weather events, labour shortages and more recently the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The CCRI was a partner in the EU Horizon 2020 “Towards SUsustainable and REsilient EU FARMing systems (SURE-Farm)” project between 2017-2021. SURE-Farm involved a consortium of 16 European research institutions (from 13 countries), led by Wageningen University.

The purpose of SURE-Farm was to identify and evaluate the resilience of the farming systems to sudden shocks and gradual changes, observing the capacity of the farming system to react and to generate robust, adaptable or transformable responses (Meuwissen et al., 2019). The project also identified the tools that enhance the viability of the arable farming system, both from an institutional and individual farm’s perspective.

In the UK, the project focused on arable farming in the East of England. This region, known as the UK’s ‘breadbasket’, is responsible for up to one third of the country’s cereal production. The SUREFARM project:

- studied the effects and responses of the arable farming system in the East of England to the full variety of global and national challenges
- systematically investigated the factors and drivers that influence transformation of the farming system and mitigation of the negative effects of risks.

Within the UK, a new Environmental Land Management scheme will replace the European Common Agricultural Policy post-Brexit. The Scheme aims to improve the environment, animal health and welfare and to reduce carbon emissions.

The objectives and findings of SURE-Farm are central to understanding the various factors at play during this transition period and have direct relevance in strategically informing and supporting policymakers in their pursuit of a vision for a new English agricultural system - for the arable sector, and beyond.

The project has purposefully taken a multi-disciplinary approach, from quantitative surveys and data analyses to participatory approaches directly involving farmers, policymakers and stakeholders.

This summary focuses on a selected set of outputs from SURE-Farm and the work specifically undertaken by CCRI.



Farmers’ perceptions of risk and resilience capacities

In order to understand what challenges, coping strategies and type of resilience are prevalent in the East of England, a large-scale telephone survey was conducted in November-December 2018 involving a sample of 200 arable farms. The sample was stratified to ensure representativeness in terms of the geographical distribution of farms and farm size. Interviews were conducted with the farm owner/manager.

Farmers were asked about their perceptions on the risks and challenges that the arable farming system will most likely face in the next 20 years, on a scale from 1 (not at all challenging) to 7 (very challenging), where a value of 4 indicated neutrality.

[Report of farmers’ perceptions of risk and resilience capacities – a comparison across EU farmers](#)

Farm demographics and structural change

The dynamics in farms and the population of farmers are shaped by the economic, financial, social, institutional and environmental landscape in which they are situated. These factors can trigger short- and long-term demographic changes, concerning the number, size and specialization of farms as well as the decisions of young people to take on and continue the farming business. What is at stake, ultimately, is the capacity of arable farming to deliver the goods demanded by consumers and society at large, such as sufficient quality healthy food and ecosystem services. Farm demographics and structural change across the 12 European case studies were explored through semi-structured interviews with farmers and others on the farm in 2018. Findings are based on semi-structured interviews carried out with 23 farmers in 2018.

[Report on current farm demographics and trends](#)

Learning to be resilient in East of England arable farming

As the UK transitions into a new post-Brexit agricultural policy, farmers will need to adapt and adjust their businesses in response to shifting priorities and demands on agriculture, with an increasing focus on environmental conservation. This will require learning across a range of dimensions, involving fundamental shifts in farmers attitudes, social norms and farmer identities. Learning is recognised as an important component of risk management and resilience, enabling farmers to respond to and manage the wide range of risks and challenges.

The SURE-Farm project, therefore, investigated the learning strategies of arable farmers in the East of England to better understand their capacity to remain resilient during this period of significant agricultural restructuring. Semi-structured interviews and an influence mapping activity were conducted with eighteen farmers in 2018. Questions sought to better understand both the external factors that influence decisions, but also farmer values, norms and beliefs. Cognitive, relational and normative learning were assessed across the reliance capacities of robustness, adaptability and transformability.

[Report on farmers' learning capacity and networks of influence in 11 European case studies](#)

Navigating through the transition

SURE-Farm has demonstrated that the farming community in the East of England is well aware of

the challenges ahead. The study has reaffirmed the resilience of the arable farming system to shocks and gradual changes, demonstrating robustness, the ability to adapt, and in some cases even transformation in the face of significant risks and challenges. However, the transition from being an EU member to being outside the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU single market is a profound and fundamental change, both in terms of a loss of subsidy and changes to trade and market competition (DEFRA 2020), that requires a wide range of actions, planning and support. This can only be meaningfully achieved through an enabling institutional environment that coordinates gradual transformation at economic, environmental, social and cultural levels.

SURE-Farm findings suggest that farm support does not necessarily need to increase financially, but it does require a change in design. A move from the Basic Payment Scheme to environmental payments has the potential to gain the support of farmers if delivered well and overcomes the limitations of previous and existing agri-environmental schemes, such as inflexibility, high levels of bureaucracy and delays in payments.

In conclusion, the SURE-Farm experience has indicated that agricultural and rural policies need to be more holistic, encompassing economic, social, cultural and environmental goals in order to facilitate farmers and land managers to deliver a wider variety of goods, including public goods. The process of policy formation would benefit from an improved participation of farmers, in order to foster and cultivate farmers' ownership of these policies, which would enhance their effectiveness and, in turn, empower farmers to narrate positive stories of resilience across the fields of East of England, and beyond.

CCRI Papers Published from SURE-Farm

[Exploring how social capital and learning are related to the resilience of Dutch arable farmers](#)

[Stakeholder perspectives to improve risk management in European farming systems](#)

[Impact of Covid-19 on farming systems in Europe through the lens of resilience thinking](#)

[Adaptive governance and resilience capacity of farms: The fit between farmers' decisions and agricultural policies](#)

[How do stakeholders perceive the sustainability and resilience of EU farming systems?](#)

[Risk management and its role in enhancing perceived resilience capacities of farms and farming systems in Europe](#)

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