

Can regenerative agriculture deliver nutritious food and a just food system?



The term regenerative agriculture has become a unifying concept within food systems - one that has been used and endorsed by a growing number of farmers, producers, retailers and funders. But how confident are we in regenerative agriculture's environmental and productivity claims? And what would a regenerative shift in UK agriculture mean for our food system as a whole? For example, what food would be on the shelves and how much would it cost, who would need to be growing what, would we need to import more or less, and of which products?

Our one-year research project aims to clarify if and how regenerative agriculture can support a just transition towards both environmental and food and nutrition security goals. Does a move to regenerative agriculture support a regenerative food system?

What kind of research project is this?



Agile Initiative Research Sprint

Funded by the Agile Initiative (Oxford University), Sprints have a quick turnaround (results within 12 months) to support urgent environmental policy questions.

Co-created

Stakeholders are involved throughout the project to make sure it answers questions that will help them in their work towards positive change.



Qualitative

We'll be getting our answers from talking to people, making space for collaboration, and through analysis. Our outputs will be narrative, visual and policy-focused. While we won't be offering numbers, we hope our research will be useful to those who do.

The Challenges

There's a lot of work on regenerative agriculture already underway. This project adds value by responding to a combination of these four challenges:

1.

The Central Challenge

A lot of research thinking has focused on regenerative agriculture on-farm impact. However, without considering the systems-level implications of a UK shift to regenerative agriculture, particularly for nutrition and food security/justice, the potential trade-offs ahead will go unexamined.

2.

The Definition Challenge

There's no one definition of regenerative agriculture, and that has both benefits and disadvantages. Depending on the stakeholder, regenerative agriculture can mean systems of production that range from tweaks to the status quo to radical transformation. These differences could have potentially profound implications for how regenerative agriculture is implemented, the goals it can claim to deliver against, and what kind of food systems are implied.

3.

The Monitoring & Evaluation Challenge

What should we measure, how and over what timescale? Some of the desirable goals that regenerative agriculture claims to achieve are hard to measure, and stakeholders prioritise measurement differently. Regenerative agriculture's contribution to climate and other goals is also hard to monitor from a systems perspective.

4.

The Enabling Environment Challenge

As research attempts to model regenerative futures and their delivery against a range of selected goals, practitioners fear reductive approaches that fail to encompass the breadth and depth of regenerative agriculture as they promote and practice it. While growing interest in regenerative agriculture is celebrated, increasing corporate engagement can provoke concern about greenwash. Progress will require trust between these communities.

Our Goals

Phase 1

We want to create a shared understanding of the diverse 'versions' of regenerative agriculture. This does not mean creating a single definition - rather we want to understand: what versions of regenerative agriculture are people working with? What do these different versions say about what regenerative agriculture can achieve, with what actors, and how do they cluster together with which values, red lines and assumptions?

How?

Interviews and surveys will help us to map these clusters, then stress-test them with our stakeholders.

Phase 2

We will offer a detailed, qualitative understanding of the potential implications of these versions, and in particular of their differences, for how regenerative agriculture plays out in the wider food system. What does a regenerative UK mean for what we grow, eat and trade? What are the trade-offs and risks involved? Who benefits, and under what conditions? And importantly, what needs to change if the benefits are to be maximised and the risks managed? With the help of our partners, we'll consider the policy conditions required by each of these versions to enable benefits and mitigate risks.

How?

Workshops and discussion with stakeholders across the food system.

Phase 3

There are already a lot of proposed indicators out there; we hope to clarify the picture of how progress towards a number of regenerative futures (as per the versions) is to be assessed and monitored, by bringing practitioners and modellers into direct dialogue.

How?

Another workshop! With a different mix of stakeholders.

Phase 4

Across the twelve months, we hope to build networks and trust between a body of stakeholders who draw upon different disciplines, sectoral knowledge and values, through collaboration and dialogue.

How?

Regular engagement with our core stakeholder group who, over the course of the year, will provide direction, guidance, feedback and insight from their own fields. They'll also help us make our outputs as useful, and usable, as possible.

This research aims to be directly useful to stakeholders:

- Governments (whether national, devolved or local) have a clearer understanding of the contribution regenerative agriculture can make towards policy goals.
- The farming community has a clearer picture of how regenerative practice on-farm connects to wider food system goals.
- Retailers and manufacturers are better able to develop strategies to deliver environmental, climate and food security goals.
- Civil society and others have more tools for identifying greenwash.
- Expectation management and trust between stakeholders will lead to better collaboration on regenerative agriculture between the private, public and third sectors.

Who Are We?

Research Team



TABLE is a global platform exploring the evidence, values and visions shaping global debates about the future of sustainable food systems. We know that both scientific evidence and our personal biases play roles in these crucial conversations - we try to untangle the relationship between the two. By providing clarity on where, how and why we disagree, we support and facilitate inclusive dialogue to promote better decision making.

Funder



The Agile Initiative funds and supports collaborations between researchers based at Oxford University with decision makers and stakeholders to produce rapid environmental research in response to urgent policy challenges or opportunities. Sprints are interdisciplinary and solutions-focused, delivering results within one year.

Partners



Green Alliance is a charity and independent think tank, focused on ambitious leadership for the environment. With a track record of over 35 years, Green Alliance has worked with the most influential leaders from the NGO and business communities. Green Alliance's work generates new thinking and dialogue, and has increased political action and support for environmental solutions in the UK.



The Food Foundation is a charity focused on changing food policy and business practice to ensure everyone, across the UK nations, can afford and access a healthy and sustainable diet. They work in partnership with researchers, campaigners, community bodies, industry, government and citizens to galvanise the UK's diverse agents of change.

Our Core Stakeholder Group



How Can I Find Out More?

Sign up for [Fodder](#), TABLE's regular newsletter, keep an eye on the [TABLE website](#) and [socials](#), or reach out to [Richard](#) or [Ruth](#) with your questions. Visit the [Agile Initiative website](#) to read more about what's happening in the environmental research-policy space at Oxford University. Sign up to the [Agile mailing list](#) to be kept up to date.

