

Researching the future

Helen Browning
Eastbrook Farm

Wearing different hats – farmer, marketing, PCFFF, AEBC (both making comments on research), and recent Chair of Soil Association (and presume it's from that stance that I've been asked to speak today) – but despite all these hats and the interfaces I've had with research – from student research which took me into organics, to UKROFS R&D, to hosting research at Eastbrook, and sitting on steering committees – I still wondered, as I started to put ideas together, what credentials I have to speak to such an august body of scientists and researchers.

And herein lies a key problem for society and its relationship with science. It is a problem that manifests itself through distrust, sometimes outright hostility, sometimes disengagement and lack of interest. It stems from the sense that the science and research community is either one you're in, or you're not. And if you're not, it's intellectually impenetrable and of little relevance to your daily or even working life. And if you are, perhaps you end up talking in technical jargon to others in the same field. This disenfranchisement from science has come through very strongly in the work that the AEBC has done on public attitudes – in this case to the rather extreme case of genetic engineering – but I feel it lingers to a greater or lesser extent in all walks of life. It is an issue that must be addressed.

You might expect it to be manifested least of all in the organic world, and yet it is something that we must all still guard against. On the plus side, most publicly funded organic research projects have, to my knowledge, engaged farmers and other likely beneficiaries of the research on steering committees over the last few years, and dissemination of results – a very real challenge for most research projects – has been greatly enhanced by the engagement of many of you with the organic community, and by the seminars and events held by Elm Farm and the Soil Association, and their publications also.

But before we give ourselves a completely clean bill of health in this regard, I would like to step back for a moment and take a look at what sorts of research we are (and should be) doing today, how it is (and should be) funded, and how to maximise the benefit to those communities it is aimed at helping.

It seems to me that organic research currently centres around the following objectives:

- a) comparative research – how do organic systems score compared with 'conventional', e.g. environmental issues, health, disease, productivity, etc. This is research which benefits policy-makers (and campaigners), but has no relevance to farmers, the organic food chain, or even consumers (except as a marketing tool).
- b) Economic research – again, this can be comparative, in which case pretty transient, based within a manipulated economic environment; based also on potentially transient 'premiums' and with no concept (usually) of cost

- internalisation. It can also look at increasing profitability within an organic system, which may entail pushing standards to the limit – more on this later.
- c) Technical research – how can we solve the organic problems of the day, whether they be blight in potatoes or mastitis in dairy cattle. Done correctly, with proper engagement with the potential beneficiaries, and conducted within an organic system, this is clearly fundamentally useful work, with benefits to the whole of the organic food chain, including consumers and society, and with many long-term benefits to the rest of agriculture as light is shed onto techniques that no business has an interest in selling (again, I will come back to this).
 - d) Researching the future – the sort of research which will take us where we need to be tomorrow. Organic farming can be seen as the pioneer of sustainability, but it isn't 'sustainable' yet. This is the area I would like to concentrate on. There are two perspectives on this. Either we grow organic in volume, and aim to turn the world organic with the immense danger, almost certainty, that this will be impossible with the current level of consumer interest and political will, (unless the standards are diluted), or we spearhead change in food and farming, break new ground and have confidence now that if we get it right, the rest of world will follow.

My belief is that research emphasis needs to switch from 'comparative' and 'economic' – useful though they may be in many circumstances – to 'pioneering'. "How can we do better – how can we grow food that definitely does deliver health benefits through soil husbandry, varietal development – or flavour (which is probably linked to the first two)?" Can we develop fossil fuel-neutral systems of production, processing, marketing and distribution?

I come across much debate on the role and balance of public and private funding for research. Outside (I hope at least) of the organic context, society is increasingly suspicious of the results of privately funded work and the ends to which it is used. Contentious research must, it seems, be examined with independently financed eyes, but more relevant to this conference is how we can best utilise (and justify the use of) public money.

Government sponsorship of agricultural research in any 'near market' form seems set to dwindle, but there are many reasons why this should be resisted in the organic context.

1. The need to pioneer. Such research is expensive but has huge potential benefits to society, delivering for instance antibiotics or a reduced need for pesticide use.
2. The absence of commercial research. This applies again to techniques with public or environmental benefit, e.g. the use of clovers, manure management, soil fertility optimisation, and non-drug animal techniques.
3. The need for policy data. This is the basis of much comparative research.

These examples show that it is in the public interest that organic research is publicly funded.

Given this rationale, it is vital that we engage the public (not just the farmers who will make that research flesh in the future) in our aims and ambitions for an organic future. We must encourage an understanding of the real issues, sometimes the trade-offs, and the possibilities for the future of food and farming, because society must become engaged in our work if we are to continue to receive its support, in funding and in the marketplace, and in the political process.

If we are to find ways of doing this more convincingly, then we must continue to build on the links between all organisations involved in the development of the organic movement. We need to debate the direction and balance of research, find ways of enhancing the funds available to research bodies, and genuinely connect with the public and with farmers to develop real support, consultation and understanding on the way ahead.

1. In research, as in all things organic, we must be prepared to work in new ways, to develop new models. Indeed, perhaps one way of achieving this that could come out of this conference is a commitment to widen the forum to take this approach forward, with public, environmental, Soil Association, and farmer representation. Today we have an enviable organic research community; tomorrow's challenge is to ensure we maximise its potential to help us take the next steps forward.

From a plenary address given at UK Organic Research 2002, 26-28th March, Aberystwyth.