

## Fork to Farm Dialogues, South West Scotland

### Summary Report

November 2021

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The South West Scotland Fork to Farm Dialogues took place between March and November 2021. The aim was to connect farmers and food producers with local authority policy officers to discuss shocks to the food system, and challenges faced by farmers. The dialogues had a specific focus on the climate and ecological emergency, but also looked at other system shocks such as Brexit and Covid. Our target geographical area was Dumfries and Galloway, South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire.

We wanted to create opportunities for collaboration and sharing ideas, to identify work that can be done on a local level, what needs to be done at Scottish policy level, and what the key messages would be to world leaders at the COP26 UN Climate Change conference, held in Glasgow in November 2021.

The Fork to Farm Dialogues has been a global project initiated by Nourish Scotland early in 2021. Parallel dialogues took place in Mexico, Kenya, Indonesia and other places around the world. Nourish says: *“The Fork to Farm dialogues are about farmers and cities being the drivers, rather than the objects, of transformation. These dialogues are local-led relationship-building meetings being held across the world in preparation for our Global Fork to Farm Dialogue at COP26. To date, the voices of farmers have often been absent in food systems and food policy discussions. For farmers to be at the forefront of change, it is necessary to strengthen trust between farmers and cities.”*

The SW Scotland dialogue was coordinated and delivered by Propagate, with local support from the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere, and peer support from Nourish. The team from Nourish also organised the Global Dialogue at COP26.

#### **Key outcomes:**

- Processing facilities are needed in Dumfries and Galloway to enable small batches of livestock to be dispatched in a humane way, and for local meat products to be accessible to local markets.
- Cooperative food hubs run by food producers could be a solution to local and small scale supply chains.
- Good agricultural land being planted up for the forestry industry is a real problem, but opportunities exist for livestock and trees to exist in agroforestry systems.
- More vegetables can and should be produced in the region, and in an ideal farming future more people will be working on the land. There is currently a skills gap here that needs addressing.
- A regenerative and nature based farmers network should be established as an outcome of this work, that enables farmers to share skills, ideas and practice around agroecological and regenerative farming.
- We need to tell the stories of better food production in D&G, through education, outreach and awareness.

#### **The Online Dialogues**

The Fork to Farm Dialogue journey in South West Scotland started with an open call out for participation across farming networks and local authorities. Around 50 responded to this call, the majority farmers and others local authority officers or other public sector workers. On signing up, people were asked: *What are your hopes from being involved in this project?* The answers to this form the word cloud below.



Aside from the Farm Walks, all sessions have been held on Zoom due to the Covid Pandemic and lockdown restrictions, but also to accommodate the widespread geographical area covered by the attendees.

In February we held an information session attended by 25 people. More than half of these attendees were farmers. We were also joined by NFUS representatives and local authority officers from across all target areas. This was followed up with phone calls to everyone who attended or had expressed an interest. The phone calls gathered feedback and aimed to encourage folk to attend again. Each session thereafter was recorded, with an average of 20 people attending – drawn from both farming and local authority sectors. Recordings and notes were sent to the entire mailing list after the session.

The March session, attended by around 20 people, looked at agriculture through a food systems lense: Environment, Economy, Health, Society and Politics. We aimed to identify good practice, and areas for improvement. The areas we identified were: short and local supply chains, forestry and woodlands, health and inequality, and biodiversity.

In April we looked at short and local supply chains. Two speakers were invited to outline their work in this area. Howard Wilkinson discussed his work around local markets and food hubs in South Ayrshire. We also welcomed Heather Murray and Mark Hunter from East Ayrshire Council. Over the last 10 years they have increased the percentage of locally and organically produced food on school plates to around 70%. They outlined their innovative approach to doing this while navigating EU and Scottish procurement frameworks. Farmers attending were particularly inspired by the ideas of forming producer cooperatives that can put forward collective bids for local sourcing tenders.

In May we tackled Forestry and trees on farms. Again we invited 2 speakers working in this area. Morag Paterson is a self-directed forestry researcher, and Nikki Yoxall, a farmer from Aberdeenshire who uses an agroforestry system with Shetland and Galloway cattle.

Morag is on the Dalry Community Council in Galloway and a member of the group Communities for Diverse Forestry. She has interviewed and engaged with over 40 professionals across forestry, farming, land use and other relevant disciplines. Morag asked – what are the motivations for farmers to go for sitka spruce plantations – thus taking the land out of food production and radically reducing biodiversity. How can farmers, land managers and communities work better on this issue?

**Table 6c - Pre-submitted Woodland Creation Options by Conservancy - 2022**

	Highland and Islands	Grampian	Perth and Argyll	Central Scotland	South Scotland	Total
Conifer / Diverse Conifer	0	0	650	0	2500	3150
Native & Other	235	0	650	0	200	1085
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1300</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2700</b>	<b>4235</b>

The second speaker Nikki gave us an overview of her farming practice: reducing herd sizes and incorporating trees, which provides a huge range of benefits from animal health to ecosystem services.

Farmers discussed how this kind of system could be 'retrofitted', and how easily farmers would be able to make a transition to different farming methods while still being profitable.



In June we initiated another callout across farming communities and opened the door once again for people to be involved in the dialogue. This expanded the mailing list to 78 people, of which around 50 are farmers.

This callout coincided with lockdown restrictions easing and our plans for two Farm Walks in August. As such, the July dialogue was a 'catchup' session for new people, and some reflection on the discussions so far.

**The Farm Walks**

In August 2021 we held 2 Farm Walks. This was an opportunity to get farmers and other stakeholders together to make real connections, and to look at some good on farm practices around climate and nature friendly farming.

We visited 2 farms: Torr Organic Dairy Farm near Auchencairn, Galloway; and Caldwell's Veg near Girvan, Ayrshire. Around 20 people attended each event, the majority of these from farming backgrounds. Each event started with sharing a simple soup and bread. After lunch we had a discussion around our visions for future farming systems.

## The Visioning Script

Close your eyes and imagine it's 2045.

*At COP26 in 2021, amazing things happened. Binding agreements were made to radically transform our economy and global systems. New paths were forged based on justice, solidarity and ecology.*

*Farmers and food producers came together to build agroecological systems based on food sovereignty.*

*So... in 2045...*

*What do our future farming systems look like and smell like?*

*What people are there and what jobs are they doing?*

*What food are we eating?*

*And how are we going to get there...?*

Key discussion points were:

- ✓ More people working on the land
- ✓ Mixed farming landscapes
- ✓ Local food hubs
- ✓ More biodiversity – the right trees in the right places

We then walked around the respective farms. At **Torr Farm** we heard from brother and sister duo Ross and Lee about their journey to convert the farm to organic, reducing herd sizes and conservation grazing strategies, hedgerow planting, organic grassland management and efforts to encourage farmland birds back. They have also started selling some of their milk locally via local shops at refill machines.

Feedback from Torr Farm included:

*"Could we get a lot more farmers and land managers to farm like this? While it takes time to get there, I think it looks good as an option (potentially financially as well) for whatever subsidy becomes for farmers post 2024."*

*"I was really interested to hear Ross and Lee talk about the history of the farm, what 'improvements' their father made, how they moved into organic; selling the land to Standing Stone; the hutting project."*

*"I can see that many farmers in D&G are trying to reduce their use of imported concentrates for beef and dairy production, but keeping these animals grass fed means making a lot of hay and silage. Presumably this method of feeding cattle is the same for both organic and conventional farming? It seems an impossible conundrum."*

*"Hedges! Very impressed by the extensive hedgerow planting at Torr Farm."*

At **Caldwell's Veg**, Gordon Caldwell gave us a tour of his 43 acres. He produces a large range of mixed vegetables, most of which are for hospitality supply chains. Gordon is not yet organic, but has around 14 acres in organic conversion. He is using cover crops, clover swards and a small herd of organic cattle to improve soil structure and fertility.

Feedback from Caldwell's Veg included:

*"It's inspiring to see vegetables being grown to this scale in this part of Scotland. We're always told you can't grow vegetables here!"*

*"Really interested in the mob grazing and diverse sward management being used to build up soil fertility in the organic conversion."*

*"I really enjoyed the tour of Gordon's operation. It requires a lot of planning and coordination. I was very interested in the organic vegetable plot. Weeds are definitely going to be a challenge. I don't know how, but if he could somehow find a way to manage some of the "weeds" in a way that they contribute to soil health and fertility even with only one or two vegetables and don't significantly diminish the crop it would be a*

*good learning. The more variety of roots in the soil the more fertile it will be.”*

*“Can we have more learning and sharing events like this? I'd love to do another local farm visit. A friend attended Patrick Laurie's talk at Big Lit Festival in Gatehouse, about his book, Native. She said he was a passionate speaker about farming and sustainability. I'd be interested to visit his farm.”*



*Ross describing some of the farming practice at Torr Farm*

### **South West Scotland Dialogue at COP26**

The conclusion of the project for 2021 was always intended to be COP26 in Glasgow, held in November. Principally, the aim was to bring dialogue groups around the world together for a Global Dialogue. This was organised by Nourish, and took place in their 'Recipes for Resilience' space. In addition to the Global Dialogue, this space hosted a 12 day programme of workshops and talks around food sovereignty and sustainable food systems.

Three farmers from Galloway and Ayrshire headed up to Glasgow to participate in the Global Dialogue day. Unfortunately, the Propagate Coordinator and another farmer participant were unable to attend as they both had covid. As planned, the group met with farmers from other parts of the world. Some reflections included:

*“I had a great day. The highlight has to be meeting folks from Mexico, Kenya and other places. We all carry preconceptions about these far away places (I did at least) and it was wonderful. The live feed from Kenya was great! They danced for us and we danced for them. I offered the people in my group a farm visit but I doubt they'll have time.*

*I would like to learn more first hand from Africa and South America. What is the truth about farming? We hear the worst (logging, killing of activists etc.) which makes it all sound hellish and depressing. I got the feeling there was more to it than that and people were doing amazing stuff in spite of Government and barriers. I would be interested to learn more about larger businesses too. Coffee growing co-ops etc,*

medium size farms who weren't using slave labour or deliberately causing pollution (maybe there aren't any but I doubt it).”

“My most memorable moment emotionally was the discussion of maternal gifts... Kenya, Mexico... Scotland... (a griddle). The day was well organised, timely overall but with substantial flexibility built in. The most challenging moment .. trying to communicate with indigenous groups in multiple locations in the Philippines by Zoom whilst a police helicopter was drowning us out as it flew over the Friday climate change youth march! Sampling the Kenyan and Mexican resilient recipe dishes was inclusive and the food very flavoursome.”

“The group I was in included both Kenyans and Mexicans. Many people joined via Zoom too. Respect for others and for their cultures. Acknowledgment of how land based people around the world are linked and so similar despite the surface differences. The many connections are far greater than what keeps us artificially apart. Acceptance from both other farmers and non farmers alike that agriculture is a circular system and that the current media hype around cows and climate is not sustainable and is distinctly misleading, if not a direct attempt to remove scrutiny of many other sectors which affect our environment. Acceptance of some of the damage done to food systems by Western-ism.”

Our group’s other contribution to the COP26 proceedings was the **Agroecological Jigsaw**. This beautiful image was created by artist Emily Tough. Also a market gardener at East Coast Organics, Emily had sat in and listened to the farmer’s visioning sessions and joined us on the farm walks. She was tasked with producing an image that summarised the discussions.

This image has been turned into a jigsaw – 700x500mm and cut into 28 pieces.



The jigsaw was placed in Nourish's Recipes for Resilience space during COP26, set up so anyone could interact with it.

Additionally, 2 sessions were held with a Propagate team member who facilitated discussion using the jigsaw as a visual tool. One of these sessions was held in the 'Green Zone' - the official public space for the COP26 conference.



*The Jigsaw in the Green Zone at COP26*

Going forward, the Agroecological Jigsaw can be used at community events of all types. It will spark conversation around what we want our future farming systems to look like, and record people's thoughts on how we are going to get there.

### **Next Steps**

We have seen from this project clear energy and enthusiasm for work that connects farmers to talk about shared challenges and solutions. Interest over the course of the project has grown – and continues to grow. Farmers are coming forward offering farm walks.

Propagate has some funds remaining. We will use this to move from the Fork to Farm work into establishing a SW Scotland Regenerative Farmers Group. We want to continue to harness the momentum and energy that has grown up around the dialogue sessions, and facilitate a space where farmers and food producers can come together regularly for farm visits, group discussions, peer to peer learning and more. It is intended that through this programme, farmers will see and experience 'climate and nature friendly farming' - through adaptation and mitigation measures. This will inspire and encourage farmers to adopt these practices on their own farms. Further funds will be needed and are already being sought to continue this work.

We will connect this peer group to the [\*\*Dumfries and Galloway Sustainable Food Partnership\*\*](#). The Partnership's recent [\*\*Local Food Gatherings\*\*](#) also engaged with farmers, and these conversations echoed calls for more peer to peer supported learning opportunities.

The Agroecological Jigsaw is available for community events, conferences, seminars or any other appropriate gatherings. There are 5 jigsaws, so these can be used across Scotland, wherever Propagate works.

For more information about the Regenerative Farmers Group or the Agroecological Jigsaw, please contact Abi via [\*\*abi@propagate.org.uk\*\*](mailto:abi@propagate.org.uk)

Our thanks to the team at Nourish for initiating this project and holding the global space. Thanks also to the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere for all their support and connections. Huge appreciation to Emily our artist. And of course a massive thank you to all the farmers, local authority representatives, NFUS and other people who contributed, participated and ultimately made this project happen.