

RURACTIVE Forum

Empowering rural
communities to act for change

23 April 2026



RURACTIVE



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Parallel roundtables

RURACTIVE Rural Development Drivers (RDDs):

- Sustainable multimodal mobility
- Local services, health and wellbeing
- **Sustainable agrifood and ecosystem management** →
- Energy transition and climate neutrality
- culture and cultural innovation
- Nature based and cultural tourism



Sustainable agrifood system and ecosystem management

Prof. Ian Baker

University of Birmingham Institute of Forest Research

Facilitator: Blanca Casares, AEIDL

OBJECTIVE: Generating proto-recommendations aligned with current and upcoming EU policy frameworks.



Policy Recommendations → Policy Formulation

Drawing on practical experience





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Sustainable agrifood systems & ecosystem management

Round table - discussion

Professor Ian Baker

University of Birmingham/Catalys

23/4/26

Introductions - about me

Professor – University of Birmingham Institute of Forest Research (BIFoR; Honorary)

Senior Specialist – Rural and Regional Development AEIDL

Research Associate – Countryside and Community Research Institute – University of Gloucestershire

Managing Director – Catalys Ltd – undertaking a wide range of

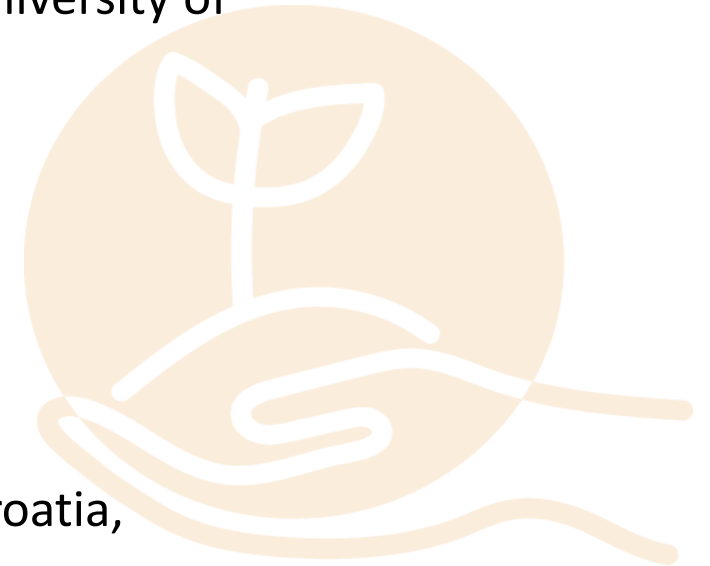
My track record:

Head of Food and farming policy and programmes for West Midlands

Senior advisor to Slow Food International, advising on impact

Fisheries – projects including FLAG evaluations, national assessment of Croatia, advisor to UK fisheries body; SEAFISH

Family background of **farming** and **food retail**



Sustainable agrifood systems & ecosystem management - “what is are such initiatives trying to achieve?”

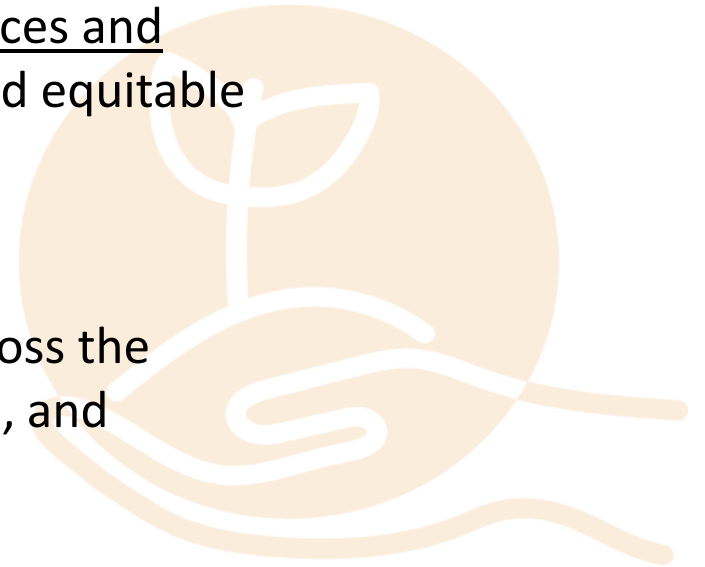
Definitions – what is a sustainable agri-food system?

A sustainable agrifood system is one that produces food in a way that balances and delivers **environmental, economic and social objectives** in a responsible and equitable way.

Within Ruractive – this is given an **innovation** focus:

“the introduction and deployment of nature-based and digital solutions across the entire food supply chain (production, processing, distribution, consumption, and resource recycling), together with agroecological practices.

The objective is to achieve **healthy ecosystems, resilient rural economies, social wellbeing, and sustainable livelihoods.**



Grounding the definition

Within **Ruractive the Rural Development Driver (RDD)** is grounded in the recognition that:

- **Rural agri-food systems** and **natural ecosystems** are essential for food production and the provision of ecosystem services.
- The **transition** towards sustainable agrifood systems remains a **major challenge** for rural areas, requiring **systemic innovation** rather than isolated farm-level actions.
- **Agroecological and ecosystem-based** approaches are crucial to maintaining ecosystem health while supporting long-term productivity and resilience.



What is the food system?



What is the scope of an agri-food system – field to fork

- *Amongst other things it includes **agricultural supplies, production and primary marketing, primary & secondary processing, logistics, consumer marketing and every type of food access, e.g., ingredients, foodservice, restaurants/chefs, schools, convenience, street food, dietary information and advice, food bloggers, etc., etc.... This is not an exhaustive list***
- **Blue, as well as green?**

A sustainable food system delivers....

(From Ruractive) Sustainable agrifood systems contribute directly to rural resilience by:

- Creating **employment** and **income** opportunities
- Supporting adequate and **stable livelihoods**
- Strengthening synergies with other **rural development domains**, such as nature-based and cultural tourism



Unpacking the definitions – what makes a food system sustainable

Environmental

- Environmental impact minimisation
- Ecosystem health
- Ecosystem services
- Waste minimisation
- Effective control of pests and diseases alongside responsible pesticide & herbicide use
- Reducing Climate impact

Social

- Access to healthy, nutritious, affordable food
- Equity for farmers, workers, consumers & supply chain businesses
- Farms as “good neighbours”
- Animal welfare
- Valuing food culture

Economic

- Viability
- Fair prices
- Local rural benefits from short food supply chains
- Circular economy
- Whole life cycle
- Affordable to consumers

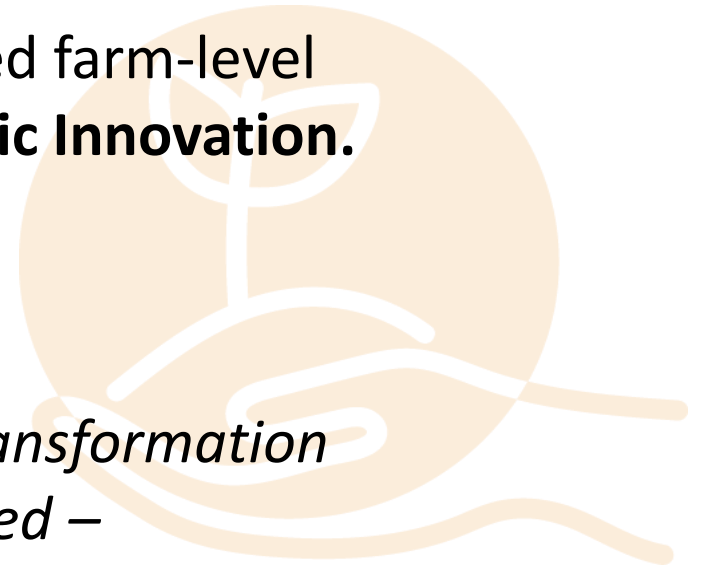
Looking for solutions – Ruractive identifies “Systemic Innovation”

How do we build these values into our food systems?

Systemic change is needed to the food system; because “ isolated farm-level actions” are nowhere near enough. Hence, the need for **Systemic Innovation**.
What is it?

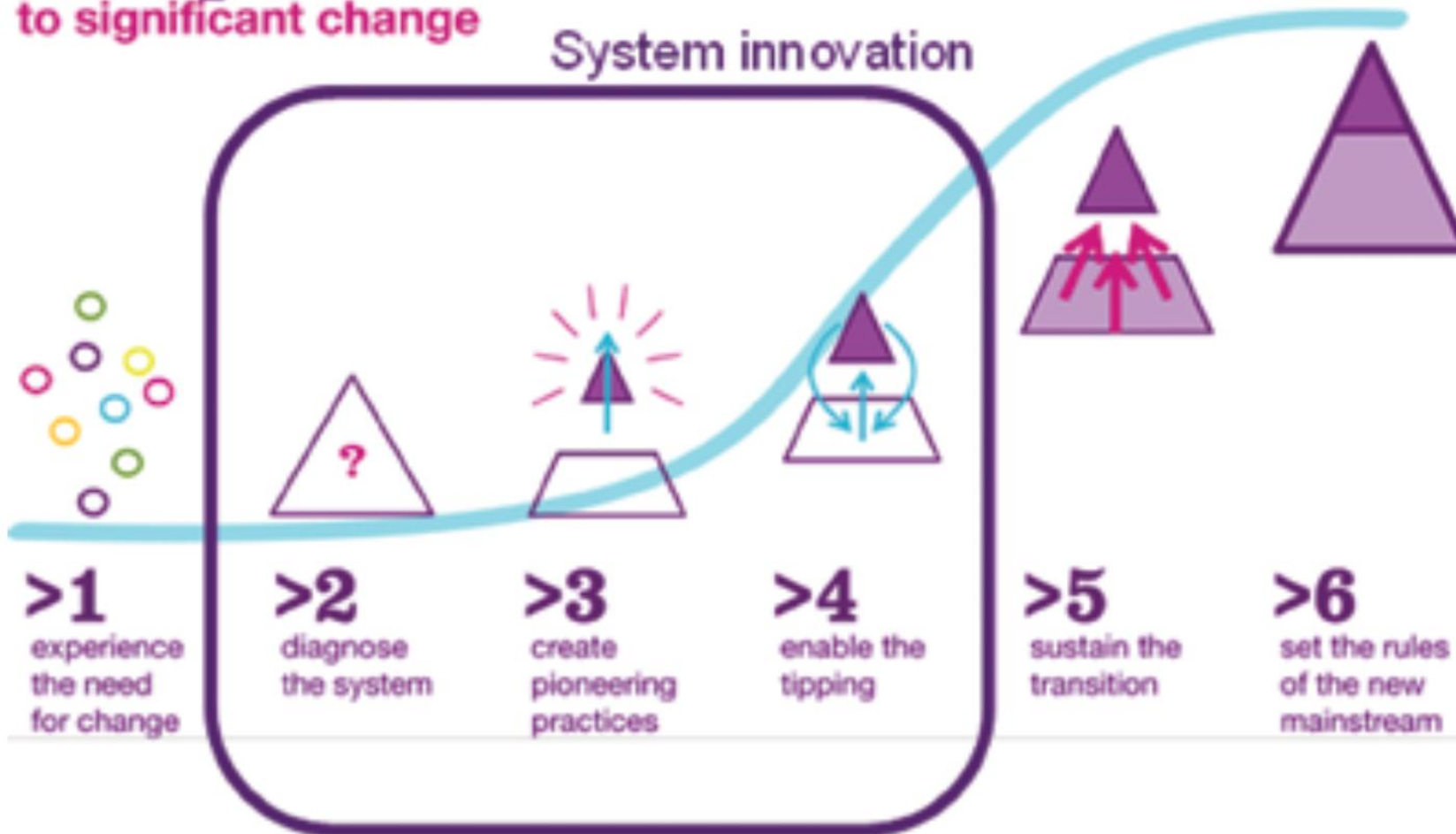
ChatGPT says:

Systemic innovation in the food system is the coordinated transformation of how food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed – addressing interconnected economic, environmental and social factors across the entire system, rather than improving isolated parts.



Systemic innovation

6 steps to significant change



The Ruractive approach

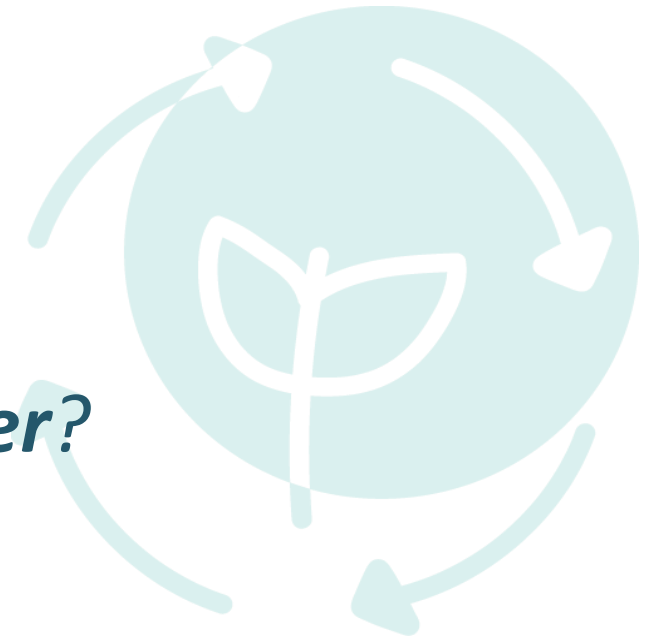
Collaborative and place-based:

- Identifying locally specific challenges
- Exploring and co-developing practical, context appropriate solutions
- Emphasising broad participation, inclusive engagement and evidence
- Should consequently be grounded in local realities



Policy questions – How do we make this happen?

- *How do we connect farming, biodiversity, and climate goals locally (place-based)?*
- *What helps farmers shift to regenerative practices?*
- *How do we make local food systems stronger?*
- *How do we make digital tools work for all farmers?*
- *How do we reward real environmental results?*



Some additional issues to consider

- **Stakeholders** – do you understand all who legitimately have a stake.
- Within the identified stakeholders – **who should be the priority stakeholders for advocacy?** Producers, Consumers, Economic decision makers, Policy makers...
- The place of **frameworks**, e.g., Farm to Fork, national frameworks.
- **Place** – locality matters, dictating potential options. Includes thinking about rural benefit, ensuring as much value is retained in rural locality
- **Cui bono** – who benefits? – unequal benefits are unsustainable.
- **Inter-generational equity** – including those who are not born yet (eg of Wales Future Generations Act)
- **Implementation** – poor implementation can undermine the best plans, key factors include, timescales, stakeholders, Mix of levers – e.g., regulation, incentive, collaboration
- **Impact on resources** key to human existence, e.g.,
 - Water quality and quantity and flood management;
 - Health characteristics of food produced
 - Access to quality, functional nature, delivered by positive ecosystem management
 - Land allocation and access
- **Sustainability influence ecosystem** - The efforts to move our food system towards sustainability are an ecosystem, comprising many elements – technical, communication, advocacy, demonstration, influence, information, advice and guidance, “hearts and minds”, regulation, certification & assurance, etc..

The pushback

De-regulations under discussion:

- de-regulation of GMOs (re-named NGTs (New Genomic Techniques))
- Reform of the Plant Reproductive Material (PRM) regulation on seeds

There will be limited if any consultation.

From Financial Times – 18.4.26:

Few 20th-century transformations did more to remake the world than the “Green Revolution”. From the 1950s onwards, new high-yielding crop varieties, synthetic fertilisers, chemical pesticides and large-scale irrigation drove a sharp increase in the output of staple crops such as wheat and rice. In its more celebratory accounts, this transformation pushed back famine and helped support rapid population growth across much of Asia and Latin America. India, one of the key centres of the Green Revolution, more than doubled wheat production between the mid-1960s and early 1970s.

As numerous critics have noted, the Green Revolution also came with enormous ecological and social costs. But one of its less discussed consequences was the link it established between food production and the fossil fuel industry across every stage of farming. Higher

Innovations to consider

What sort of digital innovations are feasibly available to rural communities, which could contribute to rural livelihoods

PGI – does it hinder or help

Certification – how to increase trust and fraud-proofing; Block chain?

Digitisation of production methods, e.g., horticulture, agronomy, stock husbandry, agrochemical application

Shortening supply chains, e.g., community supported agriculture, farmers markets

Cooperatives; consumer, producer and buying.

Consumer focused initiatives, including assurance & certification

Artisan product innovation



Concluding questions

Is your locality/region/nation/sector ready for systemic change?

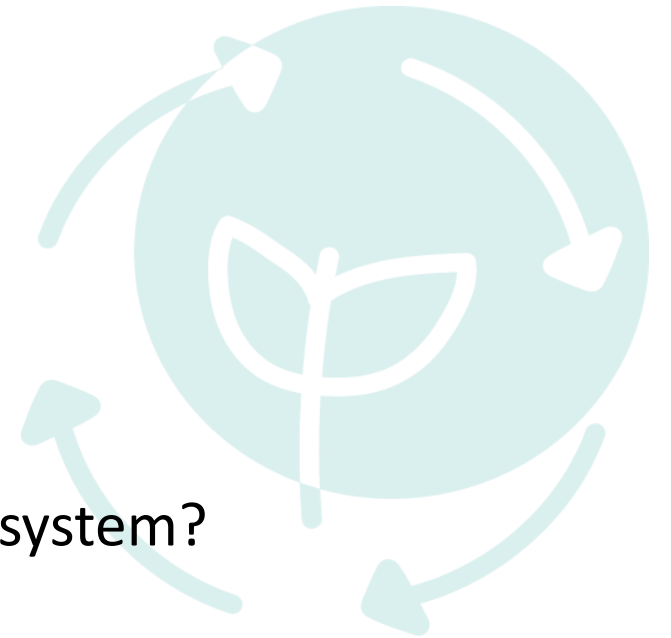
What about consumers?

More frameworks, more action...?

Who's in your tent?

Are lines of communication open to all parts of the agrifood system?

Don't forget to consider what will enable the tipping?





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Sustainable agrifood systems & ecosystem management

Round table - discussion

Blanca Casares-Guillén

AEIDL

23/4/26

Sustainable agrifood systems and ecosystem management



Questions for proto-policy development:

- How do we **connect farming, biodiversity, and climate goals locally (place-based)?**
- What helps **farmers shift to regenerative practices?**
- How do we **make local food systems stronger?**
- How do we **make digital tools work for all farmers?**
- How do we **reward real environmental results?**

What needs to change?

- From fragmented goals → Integrated place-based systems
- From risk for farmers → Supported regenerative transition
- From weak local markets → Strong territorial food systems
- From digital divide → Inclusive digital ecosystems
- From payments for actions → Rewards for outcomes

Policy and implementation levers to shape proto-recommendations

Enable transition

- National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)
- CAP delivery instruments
- Advisory systems and AKIS
- Payments for ecosystem services (biodiversity, carbon, water)
- Fiscal incentives
- Risk-sharing instruments (insurance reform, guarantees)

Enable infrastructure

- Digital inclusion and enabling infrastructure and experimentation
- Open data and interoperable digital ecosystems
- Innovation platforms and living labs

Build local systems

- Land access mechanisms (land banks, community land trusts)
- Territorial governance (landscape-level planning)
- LEADER / community-led local development
- Place-based rural strategies
- Support for cooperatives & commons-based models
- Short food chains and local value-chain cooperation
- Corporate supply chain commitments (retailers, processors)
- Public procurement (schools, hospitals) for sustainable/local food
- Knowledge exchange and farmer-to-farmer networks

Ruractive approach

- **systemic challenges**
- **need for integrated approaches**
- **shift toward outcomes and transformation**

[WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE] → [LEVERS] → [ENABLE TIPPING] → [SCALE]

Based on your experience:

1. Best ideas to answer the questions (five changes)
2. Enablers of the tipping point
3. Your initial recommendation
4. Prioritise scalable, adaptable recommendations



CHANGES	Connect farming, biodiversity, and climate goals locally (place-based)	Help farmers shift to regenerative practices	Make local food systems stronger	Make digital tools work for all farmers	Reward real environmental results (better outcomes)
	1	2	3	4	5

Sustainable agrifood systems and ecosystem management



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THANK YOU!

RURACTIVE Forum third meeting

