



Collaboration for Sustainable Intensification: The Underpinning Role of Social Sustainability

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Sociologia Ruralis

DOI:

[10.1111/soru.12275](https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12275)

Published: 01/01/2020

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Wynne-Jones, S., Hyland, J., Williams, P., & Chadwick, D. (2020). Collaboration for Sustainable Intensification: The Underpinning Role of Social Sustainability. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60(1), 58-82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12275>

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1 **Collaboration for Sustainable Intensification: The Underpinning Role of Social**

2 **Sustainability**

3 **Abstract**

4 Sustainable Intensification (SI) has been popularised in recent years as an approach seeking to
5 balance the potentially conflicting demands of enhancing agricultural outputs, with reducing
6 the negative impacts arising from the current food system. Proponents have argued that SI can
7 benefit from collaboration between farmers, but understanding is limited by a lack of data on
8 current collaborative practices. Questions have also been raised as to whether the SI agenda
9 pays sufficient attention to social sustainability, as part of a fully integrated conception of SI.
10 Tackling these issues, this paper reports on mixed methods data collection from seven case
11 areas across the UK, with a particular focus on the experience of upland livestock farmers in
12 north Wales. We evidence: (1) The extent, forms and preferences associated with farmers’
13 collaboration; with findings demonstrating higher levels of collaboration than anticipated and
14 a preference for informal forms of co-working. (2) The underpinning and mutually reinforcing
15 role of social interconnectedness in the delivery of diverse outcomes from collaboration. (3)
16 How SI is perceived to threaten social sustainability, and thus work against a more integrated
17 model of delivery. The paper concludes by arguing for a genuinely integrative model of SI to
18 secure collaborations going forwards.

19

20

21 **1. Introduction**

22 Sustainable Intensification (SI) has been popularised in recent years as an approach seeking to
23 balance the potentially conflicting demands of enhancing agricultural outputs, to ensure food
24 security, with reducing the negative impacts (both environmental and social) arising from the
25 current food system (Garnett et al. 2013; Godfrey and Garnett 2014). Specifically, the paper
26 reports on research undertaken through the Defra Sustainable Intensification Platform (SIP),
27 which defines SI in the following terms:

28 “*SI involves managing farmland to increase farm output and competitiveness, whilst protecting the*
29 *countryside and enhancing environment and social benefits. 'Intensification' of farming should not*
30 *be confused with 'intensive' farming. SI does not assume a shift from less to more intensive modes,*
31 *or vice versa. Instead, farmland is managed to maximise outcomes across economic, environmental*
32 *and social dimensions.*”ⁱ

33

34 Despite enthusiasm for SI amongst proponents from industry and policy circles (FAO 2011;
35 Foresight 2011), many uncertainties and unresolved tensions remain. Much discussion has
36 focused on the extent to which objectives for intensification can be meaningfully combined
37 with requirements for sustainability (Fish et al 2014; Garnett and Godfray 2012; Levidow
38 2018). Research has also centred on what SI means in particular locales and sectoral contexts
39 (Baulcombe et al. 2009; Scherer et al. 2018), acknowledging that “*sustainable intensification*
40 *specifies a goal, but not a trajectory*” (Godfrey 2015, p201). Whilst the scalability of SI has
41 been problematised (Gunton et al. 2016), emphasising a need for specificity and local
42 adaptation rather than generalisable approaches (Godfrey 2015), there is increasing acceptance
43 that action at scale, i.e. across multiple farm units, can benefit SI (Prager 2015; Weltin et al.
44 2018).ⁱⁱ

45

46 Environmentally, joined-up landscape-scale action can reduce flood-risk, pollution and
47 nutrient loss, whilst enhancing biosecurity, carbon sequestration and habitat connectivity
48 (Lawton et al. 2010; Prager et al. 2012; Prager 2015; Stallman 2011). In economic terms, group
49 working can enable bulk purchasing and group investments, along with labour/resource sharing
50 and collective marketing (Bijman et al 2012; Bijman and Iliopoulos 2014; Forney and Haberli
51 2017). Interaction can also improve innovation, supporting uptake of new technology and
52 techniques to enhance efficiencies (Mills et al. 2011; Moschitz et al. 2015; Schneider et al.
53 2009). Socially, collaborative working has been seen to support farmer wellbeing, due to
54 reduced labour burden and the mental health benefits of reduced isolation and stress (Saxby et
55 al. 2018; Wynne-Jones 2017). It can also provide a mechanism for cultural renewal, enabling
56 continued community viability (Dias and Franco 2018; Spyridakis and Dima 2017).

57

58 What we know less about is the current extent and form of collaboration across the sector.
59 Although there is a sizable literature on agricultural collaboration and cooperation *per se*
60 (Bijman et al 2012; Emery et al. 2017), there are limited data on the extent of more informal
61 modes of collaboration across the sector. Existing research primarily targets formalised entities
62 (Bijman and Iliopoulos 2014; Cogeca 2013; Forney and Haberli 2017; Kasabov 2015), case
63 study groups, or uptake of particular initiatives (Franks and Emery 2013; Mills et al. 2011;
64 Westerink et al. 2017), and does not capture the diverse ways in which a broader range of
65 farmers work together. For example, current data does not capture informal modes of mutual
66 aid or resource sharing. Moreover, traditional forms of collaboration are now changing as
67 agricultural and wider rural geographic contexts have altered (Emery 2015; Fonte and Cucco
68 2017; Forney and Haberli 2017). There is, therefore, a need to understand the most prevalent
69 and acceptable forms of collaborationⁱⁱⁱ for farmers today if we wish to enhance and support
70 these to deliver on SI objectives.

71

72 It is equally critical to consider how the push for SI can either work to support or undermine
73 collaborative practices. As SI is intended to combine environmental, economic and social
74 priorities (Loos et al. 2014; Mahon et al. 2017), we consider the extent to which these facets
75 are mutually supported through collaborative practices on the ground. This point is particularly
76 pertinent in light of critiques that question whether policy pressures for SI are being narrowly
77 interpreted within industry as a return to productivism, at the exclusion of environmental and
78 social priorities (Fish et al. 2014; Garnett and Godfrey 2012; Godfrey 2015; Levidow 2018).
79 Recent analyses have particularly underlined the absence of a meaningful social agenda within
80 SI advocacy, despite a stated aim to deliver on all three facets of sustainability (Loos et al.
81 2014; Mahon et al. 2017).

82

83 Speaking to these areas of concern, the paper evidences (1) The extent, forms and preferences
84 associated with farmers' collaboration; (2) The underpinning, and mutually reinforcing role of
85 social interconnectedness in the delivery of diverse outcomes from collaboration; (3) How SI
86 is perceived to threaten social sustainability, and thus work against a more genuinely integrated
87 model of delivery. Whilst the research set out to explore the data detailed under point (1) as a
88 core initial objective, findings covered in points (2) and (3) arose inductively through the
89 research process, as we discuss further in section 3.

90

91 The paper reports on mixed-method data collection undertaken in seven case areas across the
92 UK, as detailed in section 3. Data presented includes broad trends across all the areas surveyed
93 for points (1) and (2), but provides particular focus on the perspective of upland livestock
94 farmers in north Wales in the discussion of points (2) and (3) where notable geographic and
95 sector-specific trends and concerns were evidenced. These issues reflect the prevalence of high

96 environmental land value and lower levels of economic resilience amongst these upland farm
97 businesses, alongside high levels of cultural interdependency with the rural community, which
98 have led to a particular set of challenges in terms of delivering SI.

99

100 **2. Literature Review**

101 This section provides further insight into the two key issues framing the contribution of the
102 paper, namely (1) the changing patterns of farmer collaboration and potential linkages there in
103 to SI, (2) how collaboration connects with recent calls for a more integrated conception of SI
104 that encompasses social sustainability.

105

106 **2.1 Changing patterns of collaboration**

107 Whilst collaboration is traditionally a component of many farming systems, to enable labour
108 sharing at periods of seasonal demand, the number of full-time workers on farms has declined
109 markedly with rationalisation and modernisation of the sector^{iv}. Agriculture now employs only
110 1.42% of the UK's workforce (Armstrong 2016), with farms across Europe increasingly relying
111 on casualised, seasonal and contract labour (EC 2013). Despite being able to make informed
112 judgements drawing on case reporting, there are no national-level data available showing the
113 impacts of these changes on different forms of agricultural collaboration over time.

114

115 There is, however, more comprehensive reporting on formalised business cooperatives, which
116 show marked declines. This is not simply due to reduced capacity, but is the result of reforms
117 and mergers within the cooperative sector, coupled with continued competitive pressures,
118 which have radically altered the structure and function of many cooperative entities (Bijamn et
119 al. 2014; Forney and Haberli 2017; Kasabov 2015). This issue appears particularly acute in the
120 UK^v. Comparing data from Cooperatives UK and the Office of National Statistics (ONS 2018)

121 we see that just under 40% of the agricultural labour force are members of cooperatives, with
122 a gradual decline in recent years^{vi}. Diminishing experience and accompanying cultural shifts
123 towards more individualistic norms and behaviours could further exacerbate these trends
124 (Emery 2015).

125

126 However, these data only provide a partial picture. To better understand the potential (or
127 otherwise) for collaboration to support SI, we need a more thoroughgoing analysis of what
128 forms of collaboration farmers are continuing to undertake looking beyond the formalised
129 entities and activities captured in current reporting. It is this research gap that underpins the
130 first component of our data collection, as outlined in section 3, which seeks to include a wider
131 range of activities, connections and co-working, beyond registered groups. Whilst we are
132 informed by existing insights from the literature, presented in section 1, on how SI can benefit
133 from collaboration, the research is intended to get a wider-ranging sense of the collaborative
134 activities farmers are undertaking as a means to assess their general inclination and skills in
135 collaborating per-say.

136

137 **2.2 Integrated benefits?**

138 Our second area of interest is the extent to which beneficial outcomes from collaboration
139 interconnect (or not), i.e. whether there are synergies between the environmental, economic
140 and social outcomes achieved. This analytical focus was not pre-determined at the start of the
141 research process but emerged inductively. In particular, as we go on to describe in section 4,
142 our data highlights the importance and interconnecting role of social factors and outcomes.
143 These insights were then drawn out and assessed further in light of calls for a more
144 substantively integrated approach to SI (Garnett and Godfrey 2012; Levidow 2018) and

145 concerns regarding the neglect of a social sustainability agenda within SI forums (Loos et al.
146 2014; Mahon et al. 2017).

147

148 There has been considerable debate over the balance of economic and environmental agendas
149 within SI advocacy, with concerns that SI might justify “*intensification per se and the*
150 *accelerated adoption of particular forms of high-input or hi-tech agriculture*” (Godfrey 2015,
151 p200) or be “*liable to exploitation by commercial interests that will concentrate on increasing*
152 *yields and pay little attention to making food production more sustainable*” (ibid p204). This
153 has prompted calls for SI to move beyond the targeting of efficiencies within current system
154 framings towards more fundamental transformations. For example, Rockstrum et al. (2017)
155 argue that SI needs to pursue the enhancement of *all* ecosystem services from agriculture in
156 place of traditional measures of food productivity.

157

158 Extending such concerns, Loos et al. (2004) draw attention to the paucity of social
159 considerations within SI advocacy. Specifically, they highlight a lack of focus on issues of
160 justice and equity, both in access to food but also for producers and workers. This includes
161 questions around fair pay, working conditions, labour relations and wellbeing, along with
162 broader concerns regarding the viability of agricultural livelihoods and socio-cultural resilience
163 (Shreck 2006). They also contend that social sustainability pertains to questions around
164 decision-making capacity and control, cautioning against the imposition of measures and
165 approaches (see also Forney 2016; Källström and Ljung 2005). Similarly, Suhardiman et al.
166 (2016) assert the need to attend to farmer’s socio-economic context to ensure the
167 appropriateness of strategies advanced, echoing Loos et al’s (2014) emphasis on regional
168 responsiveness.

169

170 Although there has been increased profiling of food waste, poverty and nutrition (Garnett et al.
171 2013), it is not otherwise clear that a substantive change has occurred in the framing of SI to
172 take account of social sustainability. It is also arguable that current UK policy appears to elide
173 the social concerns of producers, focusing instead on ambitions to align the delivery of
174 environmental and economic outcomes (e.g. Gove 2018; Griffiths 2018; Wynne-Jones and
175 Vetter 2018). This is at a time when the social sustainability of farming is being placed in
176 increasing question across Europe (Beilin et al. 2014; Joosse and Grubbström 2017).

177

178 This raises critical questions in terms of how collaboration intersects with social sustainability
179 and a more genuinely integrative model of SI. Does collaboration enable and enhance social
180 sustainability, and visa-versa, and how does this support synergies with the economic and
181 environmental aspects of SI? Whilst there are some insights in the literature on how farmers
182 interpret the balance of environmental and economic agendas in the context of SI advocacy
183 (Fish et al. 2013; Wheeler et. al. 2019), this has not been extended to explore how (or indeed
184 if) social sustainability features. It is here that our data adds new insights.

185

186 Within the literature on farmers' collaboration, we see a largely 'siloed' perspective (Emery et
187 al. 2017), where objectives and benefits arising have been discussed as *either* economic
188 (Bijman et al. 2012) *or* environmental (Prager 2015). Whilst social factors, such as trust and
189 social capital, are widely acknowledged as important *facilitators* of collaborative action
190 (Tregear and Cooper 2016) the social *benefits* of collaboration have received less attention, or
191 are treated as a secondary objective (Wynne-Jones 2017). Some recent analyses do
192 acknowledge that collective action can have synergistic benefits, with a combination of
193 outcomes arising in tandem (Emery et al. 2017). However, as these data are primarily derived

194 from 'successful' cooperatives, there is a need for wider analysis to understand how and why
195 a wider array of farmers interact - which our data provides.

196

197 **3. Methods**

198 Data collection included a structured survey and focus group discussions in seven case areas
199 (detailed below). This was undertaken in 2015 as part of the broader Defra SIP research
200 activities, which encompassed a number of objectives alongside the focus on collaborative
201 activities. Areas of questioning covered by the survey included:

- Characteristics of the farm business
- Changes in the farm business
- Views and practices of sustainable intensification
- Environment and resource management
- Community and quality of life
- Collaboration with others

202

203 This paper focuses on the data relating to collaboration. Data collected relating to views and
204 practices of sustainable intensification are covered by Wheeler et al. (2019). This paper does
205 not repeat those findings, which largely pertain to the balance of environmental and economic
206 agendas. Our discussion of concerns surrounding sustainable intensification (in section 4.3)
207 draws, instead, on insights from the north Wales (Conwy) area focus group and additional
208 interview data, which are detailed below.^{vii}

209

210 The case areas (location shown in Figure 1), were chosen to reflect the key sectoral and regional
211 geographic variations arising in UK farming (upland and lowland livestock, including beef and
212 sheep, dairy, mixed and arable). Potential participants were recruited from a sample provided

213 by Defra and Welsh Government, which was stratified to reflect the main farm types and
214 provide good geographical coverage within the different areas. There was a target of 35
215 interviewees per case area with a final total of 244 respondents.^{viii} See Table 1 for a breakdown
216 of characteristics.

217

218 The survey derived both quantitative and qualitative data on farmer attitudes and experiences
219 pertaining to collaboration as summarised below:

- 220 • Activities undertaken
- 221 • Most important form of cooperation
- 222 • Preference for formal/informal
- 223 • Reasons for cooperating
- 224 • Benefits/difficulties arising
- 225 • Factors that enable cooperation
- 226 • Involvement in setting up cooperative activities

227

228 The survey was conducted face-to-face, with responses audio-recorded to enable full
229 transcription of open-response questions. Forms of collaboration recorded were chosen to
230 reflect a range of current practices across the sector and were not purposely linked to particular
231 SI objectives.^{ix} Our aim here was to understand the current prevalence and preferences
232 associated with farmer collaboration, to determine whether farmers have the willingness, skills
233 and experience-base to enable collaboration per say, as a positive underpinning for SI, and what
234 parameters might constrain or enable collaboration. More refined analysis was then informed
235 by the literature outlined in section 1 regarding our understanding of what forms of
236 collaboration could be connected to particular SI outcomes.

237

238 To enable the identification of particular patterns in responses within the data, e.g. by area or
239 farm type, comparisons were made using cross-tabulations for quantitative data. A statistical
240 hypothesis test for independence between paired categorical variables was conducted, using a
241 Chi-square test. An association between variables is labelled as ‘significant’ if the p-value is
242 lower than 0.05. Qualitative data were coded thematically using an inductive approach. Codes
243 were then grouped into broader categories (for example, motivations to collaborate), which
244 could be analysed in relation to participant attributes to determine any commonalities or
245 differences. Further details of coding relevant to particular results discussed is given in section
246 4.

247

248 In addition to the survey, focus groups were undertaken in each case area to provide more open
249 and context rich insights centring on (1) farmers’ reactions to the idea and challenge of
250 sustainable intensification, and (2) their perspectives on farmer collaboration. For both topics
251 a stimulus was provided to initiate discussions.^x Respondents were recruited using the original
252 sample (although avoiding duplication with those surveyed), in conjunction with a list of
253 farmers who had attended events with the partner universities. Between 6 and 13 respondents
254 attended in each area. The resulting data were inductively coded, to draw out unifying themes,
255 and used here to give supplementary insight into how farmers understood the issues in question
256 (Fish 2017). This paper presents material from the Conwy area focus group enabling a more
257 refined discussion on place and sector specific objectives and concerns.

258

259 A subsequent round of semi-structured interview data was then collected with an additional
260 eleven farmers in the Conwy area in 2017, who were working together to implement measures
261 that fitted with the objectives of SI detailed in section 1. This included collaboration as a
262 producer group called ‘Fferm Ifan’ to achieve influence in sales negotiations; economies of

263 scale and innovations from collective equipment purchasing; and implementation of joint
264 environmental measures funded by Welsh Government^{xi} (for further details see Wynne-Jones
265 et al. 2017). Interview questions with this group centred on their motivations and experiences
266 of collaborating for these different ends. Notably points relating to social sustainability
267 emerged from the interviews and other data discussed, rather than being led as part of a
268 deductive enquiry.

269

270 Overall, our results and discussion present broad themes across all areas surveyed but focus in
271 on Conwy (as detailed in section 1) due to notable themes arising. To provide further context,
272 the dominant farm type within the Conwy area is upland livestock, with land predominantly
273 being categorised as Less Favoured Area (LFA),^{xii} limiting productive capacity. 86% of Conwy
274 respondents had LFA land and 100% of the Fferm Ifan farmers. This is also the principal land-
275 use and type for Wales (Armstrong 2016). In terms of SI priorities, a strong policy steer has
276 been given on the importance of rewarding environmental outputs into the future (Griffiths
277 2018). This responds both to the existing environmental value of upland farms but also their
278 vulnerable economic position and limited capacity for intensification when benchmarked
279 against lowland producers (Dwyer 2018). Confirming the economic pressures these farms are
280 under, 47% of Conwy respondents reported their (net) farm income was ‘considerably lower
281 than the national average of £21,500/an’. This is corroborated by national survey data where
282 38% of Welsh farms made less than £25,000/an (WRO 2010), showing Conwy respondents to
283 be amongst those in the weakest financial position across all the areas surveyed. Demonstrating
284 the high environmental value of farms in the area, 66% of Conwy respondents reported agri-
285 environmental scheme participation and 91% of the Fferm Ifan group.

286

287

Figure 1 here

288 **Figure 1:** Location of the seven SIP case study areas (reproduced from Morris et al. 2017)

289

290

291

Table 1 here

292

293

294 **4. Findings**

295 To begin we consider the current extent, forms and preferences associated with farmers’
296 collaboration. We then turn to demonstrate the underpinning and mutually reinforcing role of
297 social interconnectedness in the delivery of diverse outcomes from collaboration. Finally, we
298 show how SI is perceived to threaten social sustainability, and thus work against a more
299 genuinely integrated model of delivery

300

301 **4.1 Collaboration: Extent, form and preferences**

302 High levels of collaboration were reported across all areas, as shown in figure 2. All but six
303 farmers reported that they were collaborating, and all but one in the Conwy area. Notably, the
304 figure for involvement in buyer and producer groups (commonly recorded as forms of formal
305 cooperative) was 36% across all areas, and hence comparable with the national-level data
306 discussed in section 2. This indicates that levels of collaboration across the sector are much
307 higher than formalised reporting indicates once a full range of additional collaborative
308 activities are taken into account.

309

310 Alongside buyer and producer groups, the highest levels of participation were noted for trade
311 union membership, machinery and labour sharing, discussion groups and short-term keep of
312 livestock, as shown in figures 2 and 3. All of which would not normally be encompassed in
313 official reporting of collaboration. Although formal records are available for some of these
314 activities, machinery and labour sharing are notable as key activities which fall outside of
315 formalised measures^{xiii}. Labour and machinery sharing were also reported as the most
316 important form of collaboration for a majority of farmers.

317

318 Collaborating on environmental management was reported by a lower number of farmers
319 overall but was amongst the most prevalent activities in the Conwy area (no significant
320 relationship was evident). This included both formal collaborations through agri-environment
321 schemes (6 farmers) and activities outside of these formalised schemes (7 farmers).

322

323 Critically, collaboration was not restricted to one core activity and farmers were seen to be
324 undertaking multiple forms of collaboration. For example, the majority of respondents in the
325 Conwy area (77%) were undertaking three or more forms of collaborative activity. Qualitative
326 reporting in the Conwy similarly contended that there is more collaboration between farmers
327 than government and external agencies might realise.

328

329 *Farming is probably the biggest social collaborating group. You can't think of a hundred*
330 *mechanics meeting every Tuesday [i.e. at the farmers' market]...*

331 *I don't know why they [government] think that we are not cooperating. Maybe we are not*
332 *cooperating in the ways that they are thinking of. (Conwy Focus Group)*

333

334

335

Figure 2 here

336 **Figure 2:** Bar chart showing extent and forms of collaboration for all farmers across the seven
337 SIP case areas (modified from Morris et al. 2017).

338

339

340

Figure 3 here

341 **Figure 3:** Bar chart showing extent and forms of collaboration in the Conwy area.

342

343

344

345 In terms of motivations and benefits^{xiv}, respondents reported economic factors, enabling
346 efficiencies and profit maximisation through economies of scale, as the primary driver and
347 most valued outcome from collaboration (shown in table 2). Social factors were, nonetheless,
348 valued very highly and in some cases seen to arise as a more substantive *benefit*, even if not
349 stated as a primary motivation. This was particularly so in the Conwy area where ‘mutual
350 support, neighbourliness and community’ were rated more highly than any other factor as an
351 outcome of collaboration. Knowledge exchange was also notable as an outcome of
352 collaboration, but potentially not anticipated or driving activities at the outset. Again this trend
353 is most marked in the Conwy area (as we expand below). Data on farmers motivations to
354 collaborate show a potentially worrying lack of interest in environmental drivers and
355 particularly so in the Conwy area, although this does not correlate with low levels of
356 environmental activity.

357

358 *Table 2 here*

359

360 Finally, it was evident that preferences for *informal* forms of collaboration markedly
361 outweighed those for formal collaboration, at 57% versus 26% respectively (17% had no
362 preference) across all areas. The data for the Conwy echoes this at 60% versus 34% (with 6%
363 expressing no preference). This aligns with, and potentially explains, the high levels of
364 informal collaboration reported above. Further affirming the trend for less formalised
365 collaboration in the Conwy area, our data shows relatively low levels of experience in setting
366 up formal collaborations (less than a quarter of respondents: 8 total) and lower levels than
367 expected here for participation in formalised buying groups ($p < 0.001$). Nonetheless, farmers
368 across all areas did stress that formalised modes of collaboration were preferable for activities
369 involving financial investments, such as buying equipment to share.^{xv}

370

371 **4.2 The Importance of Social Interconnectedness**

372 The following section outlines the underpinning and mutually reinforcing role of social
373 interconnectedness, particularly in relation informal collaboration but also in the broader
374 delivery of economic and environmental outcomes from formalised approaches.

375

376 **4.2.1 Social Underpinnings**

377 Across all activities and areas, social factors were perceived as the most important enabler for
378 collaborative working noted by 68% of respondents.^{xvi} This was particularly marked in
379 discussions of informal collaboration encompassing comments on ‘helping each other out’ and
380 the prevalence and enhancement of trusting relations. Critically, trust and strong social bonds
381 were not only seen pre-requisites but something that was nurtured through informal
382 collaborations.

383

384 *“Informal is good for me... It helps build trust and friendships, because you're helping each
385 other out and you're honouring your informal agreements, which I think has a greater
386 bonding aspect to it in social life.” (SIP Survey respondent 51064 Wensum and Yare)*

387

388 *“Nice to help one another. In the old days it was what's called community spirit. Just
389 neighbourly, neighbourly values. And I think with a lot of farming it's traditional values, like
390 it was 50 years ago.” (Respondent 10001 Taw).*

391

392 *“It takes a lot of time to do these things, but it's quite interesting to be involved... it's very
393 good for the community. I've become much better friends with other people now because of
394 the group.” (Fferm Ifan Farmer 9)*

395

396 In these terms, farming was likened to a more traditional and supportive form of rural
397 community that in other ways is being lost. But, equally, it was stressed that farming can be
398 isolating and otherwise challenging if farmers do not offer such forms of ad hoc support.

399

400 *“...it's good to meet people because it can be a lonely business, farming, unless you've got a*
401 *team of people around you all the time. ...it's supportive...meeting people and learning*
402 *something. So it's the social part of it and networking and making friends.”*

403 *(SIP Survey respondent 72007 Avon)*

404

405 *“Mutual support - if he gets stuck or his vehicle lets him down he can use one of mine and it's*
406 *just dead easy.” (Respondent 51092 Wensum and Yare)*

407

408 Whilst these perceptions were common across all the areas surveyed, there was a marked
409 emphasis upon the strength of community and a sense of conviviality underpinning the farmers'
410 behaviours and attitudes within the Conwy area (as shown in table 2 and outlined above). This
411 was particular evident in respondents' explanations of their preference for informal
412 collaborations:

413

414 *“We don't do formal - we trust and know other farmers. (SIP Survey respondent 20017*
415 *Conwy)”*

416

417 *“I wouldn't ask my friends to sign something if I was making a deal with them. (Respondent*
418 *20032 Conwy)”*

419

420

421 *“Community spirit. We might as well live in the city if we ask for £10 for this and that.”*
422 *(Respondent 20010 Conwy)*

423

424 *“Easier, that's how close farmers are, they work better together informally.” (Respondent*
425 *20024 Conwy)*

426

427 *“No one asks for payments around here.” (Respondent 20003 Conwy)*

428

429 These rationales indicate a high level of interdependence within farming community members,
430 which is supported by the data on levels of farmer-to-farmer contact, with 80% of respondents
431 in the Conwy area being in contact with other farmers once a week or more. Moreover, a third
432 of survey respondents here explicitly noted helping each other out, and/or discussion groups,
433 as important mechanisms for social contact. Wider discussions further confirmed a distinctive
434 social setting within the Conwy area, with 71% of Conwy respondents reporting that farming
435 was ‘essential’ to the local community, and qualitative reporting affirming the sense of farming
436 as both a cultural and socio-economic lynchpin for the area.

437

438 *It's all very communal here. There is a very strong community because obviously, there's that*
439 *many small farms. (Fferm Ifan Farmer 4)*

440

441 *You wouldn't think it but the whole community would collapse without it [farming] as there is*
442 *nothing else. (SIP Survey respondent 20016 Conwy)*

443

444 This is a trend that was echoed across all LFA livestock farmers in the survey, who were
445 statistically more likely to feel this way than other farm types ($p=0.001$). An additional
446 distinction of the Conwy area was the interconnection of farming and the use of the Welsh
447 language, which added another thread tying the community together and strengthening the

448 sense of dependence on farming for both cultural as well as socio-economic resilience (Agra
449 CEAS Consulting 2019)

450

451

452 **4.2.2 Reinforcing Outcomes**

453 Farmers here held this sense of community in such high regard, that a desire to protect and
454 strengthen it was articulated as an underpinning motivation for both informal and more
455 formalised forms of collaboration. This extends insights shared above that social outcomes can
456 act in a reinforcing cycle, both enabling and arising from collaboration. In particular, the Fferm
457 Ifan farmers reported this perspective in relation to their activities as a formalised producer
458 group, collective equipment purchasing, and decisions to participate in a joint environmental
459 scheme.

460

461 *“...with the increase in farm sizes, what I’m trying to say is nobody wants to see anybody go
462 away. We want to see them all with us here.” (Fferm Ifan Farmer 7)*

463

464 *“If you can help in any way you can, you will. That’s why I wanted a farm here and raise my
465 children here. It’s a good way of life. I think we all feel like that.” (Fferm Ifan Farmer 5)*

466

467 What the farmers are outlining here is a desire to work together as a means to assure greater
468 business viability, as a collective, which for them is indivisibly tied-up with a desire to remain
469 within, and thus sustain, their home community. Critically, in this case their activities are not
470 only producing economic benefits and innovations in farm practice, but also underpin decisions
471 to pursue environmental objectives. In both aspects, they see that can gain greater efficacy and
472 reward by working as a group.

473

474 *“The group setting is very good for going for the different funding projects because a lot of*
475 *these funds now have a minimum spend...it’s more than a small farm like this can justify but*
476 *together...*

477 *One hedge is not going to make much of a difference, but a couple of hundred is”* (Fferm Ifan
478 Farmer 4)

479

480 This disposition, to engage in collaborate approaches as a means to secure collective gains was
481 similarly explored in the Conwy focus group - *“everybody gains not just you”* - aligning with
482 reporting above on the strength of community sentiment in the area. The discussion here
483 reflects how social underpinnings support a range of outcomes from collaboration, arising from
484 informal labour/machinery sharing through to participation in formalised producer groups and
485 environmental scheme participation. But it also goes further, in evidencing how the social
486 *outcomes* arising are equally valued and feedback back into farmers’ motivations to undertake
487 such activities.

488

489 A final area of interest is the relationship between social connectedness and outcomes for
490 knowledge exchange. This underpins farmers’ ability to adapt their farming practice, making
491 appropriate changes to refine their systems and take-up new schemes to enhance environmental
492 and economic outcomes. As outlined above, the opportunity for knowledge exchange was one
493 of the key benefits acknowledged from collaboration (shown in table 2). This was particularly
494 marked amongst Conwy respondents and related to the prevalence of more informal day-to-
495 day exchanges that seem to constitute a key feature of farming in this area.

496

497 *Always good to have someone looking from the outside in rather than the inside in. You can*
498 *learn more than reading any books or articles. (SIP Survey Respondent 20023 Conwy)*

499

500 *You pick up animal health tips for other farmers when working together (Respondent 20028*
501 *Conwy)*

502

503 *To swap information and try different things out; that's how everything improves isn't it.*
504 *(Respondent 20022 Conwy).*

505

506 This provides further evidence of the interlinkages between strong social relations and
507 outcomes for SI within the Conwy area.

508

509 **4.3 Threats to Social Sustainability**

510 Throughout the previous discussion we have celebrated social sustainability in terms of vibrant
511 communities that are closely connected and interdependent. However, fears around the loss of
512 community in rural areas, connected to a reduction in farm workers and ultimately businesses,
513 are increasingly pressing (Dwyer 2018; McManus et al. 2012). Despite – or perhaps precisely
514 because of - the conviviality noted above, these concerns were particularly noted in the Conwy
515 area. Here changing labour and social dynamics over time were highlighted and questions
516 raised as to whether collaboration was now a lost cause as capacity declined, or whether this
517 was actually the critical time to pursue collaboration.

518

519 *Respondent: There's less people on farms now, so do you think that this is more important than*
520 *ever or actually because we're so busy we haven't got time?*

521 *Another respondent: Use a contractor and the social is gone.*

522 *Another respondent: If someone shouts we'll go and help and that's why...* (Conwy Focus
523 *Group)*

524

525 Whilst the figures shown in section 4.1 suggest that labour and machinery sharing are still
526 practised by just over a third of farmers, there is now an average of only 1.5 full time workers
527 per farm in the Conwy and only 10 out of 35 derived 100% of their income from the farm.
528 Consequently, traditional collective practices of gathering (of sheep on the commons), shearing
529 and hay/silage-making are being replaced by use of contractors, with 98% of respondents in
530 the Conwy using contractors. Nonetheless, these declines in labour availability have not as yet
531 diminished farmers' *willingness* to support each other, even though their capacity to do so is
532 compromised.

533

534 *We are on our own now in a way, and you haven't got the time. But, after saying that, I could*
535 *phone any of my neighbours and they'll come down and help you with any trouble straight*
536 *away. (Fferm Ifan Farmer 8)*

537

538 Caution does, however, need to be exercised in terms of how much we can expect farmers to
539 rely on often ad hoc forms of collaboration as a means of making their businesses viable.
540 Moreover, the time pressures noted also impact on the extent to which farmers are able to
541 interact in ways that can promote knowledge exchange and innovation.

542

543 Perhaps more worryingly, the Conwy farmers saw SI as potentially exacerbating rather than
544 reducing such trends, with SI associated with pressures to become more competitive, which
545 was then seen to undermine the underpinning social fabric. In particular, focus group
546 discussions highlighted a perceived contradiction between SI requiring more collaboration but

547 also greater competition, with farmers expressing frustration at the conflicting agendas and
548 apparent illogic they felt was being pushed on them.

549

550 *“Interviewer: Do you think the idea of sustainable intensification is good?”*

551 *Respondent: I think you’ll find it to be competitive. I need to be the most intensive...”*

552

553 *“Interviewer: Thinking about the social elements now, would you say that an efficient farm is
554 producing more stock for less head of people? ...does that mean we have less social benefits?”*

555 *Respondent: Yes exactly...Especially in livestock.*

556 *Another respondent: They want us to produce but they want us to really stand on our own.”*

557

558 *“Respondent: ...with the lack of staff now, the labour isn’t there to do lots of things that would
559 be good in terms of sustainability. It’s a double edged sword really, profitability.*

560 *Another respondent: Now the farmers are going out to work... there’s less people on farms.*

561 *On average there’s only three quarters of a person working, so the social thing...*

562 *You’re saving on labour but maybe your missing out on opportunities.”*

563

564 *“Interviewer: Collaboration for sustainable intensification, does it fit with us being a
565 competitive industry?”*

566 *Respondent: Yes... we’ve got to help each other...whatever you do...*

567

568 Such concerns were not only expressed with respect to increasing competition in food
569 production, but even in relation to payments for environmental outputs. This was a point the
570 Fferm Ifan group noted, highlighting a concern that such payments (i.e. those that they were
571 receiving) were not necessarily accessible to all.

572

573 *You're separating farmers out [...] If you can't get into [the paid environmental schemes]*
574 *people are going to be left behind again and there'll be people saying why can't I get that and*
575 *why are they getting that? We have to live with those people every day (Fferm Ifan Farmer 9)*

576

577 This issue has similarly been echoed by the farm unions in response to continued refinements
578 in the targeting of Welsh agri-environmental schemes over the last ten years, meaning that
579 fewer farmers receive payments, undermining the (in many ways unintended) social benefit
580 that payments previously provided (Wynne-Jones and Vetter 2018). As such, we see social
581 sustainability coming under threat from both a focus on production efficacies and narrower
582 targeting of environmental outcomes.

583

584 **5. Concluding Discussion**

585 This paper has presented evidence on the following points, which are addressed in turn through
586 this concluding discussion:

587 (1) The extent forms and preferences associated with farmers' collaboration.

588 (2) The underpinning and mutually reinforcing role of social interconnectedness in the delivery
589 of diverse outcomes from collaboration.

590 (3) How SI is perceived to threaten social sustainability.

591

592 **5.1 Collaboration**

593 The paper has worked from the starting point that collaboration has the potential to benefit SI,
594 following existing evidence of how desirable outcomes for production efficiency,
595 environmental enhancement and social support can be supported by working at scale and
596 enhancing interactions between farmers; as outlined in section 1. Our data collection and

597 analysis has sought to augment this literature by providing further insight on the experience
598 and preferences that UK farmers currently hold with regards to collaboration, to determine
599 whether there is scope (and a need) for further enhancement, and/or specific considerations to
600 take into account.

601

602 Findings demonstrate higher levels of collaboration than anticipated reflecting a wide range of
603 activities, extending beyond previous counts of formalised cooperative membership (discussed
604 in section 2), and with a particular emphasis on informal interactions. Overall, this shows that
605 willingness, social norms and practical experience are present, providing a basis for
606 collaborations going forwards. This is positive news that we should work from and share, both
607 to address recent concerns regarding declining collaborative capacity raised in the literature
608 (Emery 2015; Emery et al. 2017) and to counter the negative perceptions that some respondents
609 felt external stakeholders held (noted in section 4.1). These findings also show the benefit of
610 more expansive reporting in terms of what counts as collaboration, which could strengthen
611 insights internationally.

612

613 In terms of specific alignment with SI the mix of activities reported suggest a range of
614 appropriate skills and outcomes to be taken forwards, mapping onto the types of benefits and
615 processes noted in section 1. These include practices to support efficiencies through economies
616 of scale and innovation such as producer/buyer/discussion groups and labour/resource sharing,
617 which also have relevance for enhancement of farmer wellbeing and cultural renewal
618 (discussed further below), as well as enabling environmental improvements. Some experience
619 of collaborative environmental working was shown across all areas, with prevalence in the
620 Conwy area encouragingly aligning with policy agendas for upland farms (Griffiths 2018).

621

622 The emphasis on informal working evidenced was broadly championed as a central component
623 of productive community relations, both indicating and reproducing the necessary inclination
624 and qualities amongst farmers to achieve efficiencies from labour and equipment sharing. Some
625 considerations can, however, be noted. For example, collaborating as part of an environmental
626 scheme or making collective investments in new technologies (activities that clearly serve the
627 imperatives of SI) can require more formalised legal and financial structures and processes.
628 This point was acknowledged by respondents, but smaller upland farms (typical in the Conwy
629 area) were seen to be least comfortable and experienced in this regard and may require
630 additional support or incentives to engage in this type of working.

631

632 **5.2 Social Interconnections**

633 Further exploring farmers' preferences and motivations, the underpinning role of social
634 interconnectedness has been highlighted as a key enabler and driver of farmers' collaboration,
635 particularly so for more informal practices. Our findings therefore demonstrate that not only
636 are more farmers collaborating than expected but that this is underpinned by a strong sense of
637 mutual interdependence. These insights support existing data on successful group working
638 (Prager 2015; Tregear and Cooper 2017) but show how widespread these dynamics are across
639 farming communities, beyond the bounds of known cooperatives. This was notably so amongst
640 upland producers in the Conwy area, where a strong sense of community and socio-economic
641 interdependency act as important determinants.

642

643 Critically this interconnection appears to work as a reinforcing process, i.e. the more farmers
644 collaborate, the greater their social bond and willingness to work together further. Taking this
645 one step further, the Conwy farmers expressed a desire to collaborate to actively sustain their
646 collective business viability, so that sufficient farms could continue to exist to maintain this

647 positive community dynamic. Notably data presented in this regard related to both informal
648 and formal forms of collaboration, delivering on both production and environmental outcomes.
649 As such, we contend that collaboration (for diverse ends) both requires and enables social
650 sustainability, conceptualised here as continuing community viability and the resulting
651 connectivity, trust and commitment that farmers expressed to this cause. This indicates
652 complimentary interactions between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of SI,
653 which echo findings from research elsewhere whereby farmer groups have realised a series of
654 interconnecting benefits from collaboration acting in a reinforcing cycle (Wynne-Jones 2017).

655

656 These synergies are particularly notable from an SI perspective given that some key outcomes
657 are not necessarily being pursued by respondents in an isolated or individuated manner.
658 Achievement of environmental outcomes are a case in point, where respondents' motivations
659 to collaborate for primarily environmental ends was very low (as reported in section 4.1). But
660 the more reassuring figures on uptake of environmental activities seem to be underpinned by a
661 combination of the financial reward and social commitment that can be achieved in group
662 settings (see also Emery et al. 2017; Forney 2016).

663

664 Similarly, enhancements in knowledge exchange were not always anticipated or pursued as a
665 primary rationale for collaborating in the first instance, but emerged from the more informal
666 processes of 'lending a hand' and associated interactions. These findings connect with the
667 literature on peer-to-peer learning and how this helps expose farmers to new ideas and evaluate
668 their own practice (Schneider et al 2009; Šūmane et al 2018). Whilst not countering the need
669 for fresh ideas to challenge a sometimes conservative impetus or norming pressures in closed
670 groups (Tregear and Cooper 2016), the implicitly localised focus of discussions on what
671 practices suit the farm fit well with calls for more geographically sensitive approaches to SI

672 (Gunton et al. 2016; Scherer et al. 2018). Equally, a strong peer network can support the
673 development of adaptive management, with co-learning and action research (Eriksen and
674 Selboe 2012). This is particularly important for upland farms where the greatest gains for SI
675 may be attained by focusing on the basics of practice (i.e. soil nutrient management), rather
676 than seeking to invest in more techno-centric approaches (Gibbons et al. 2014).

677

678 **5.3 Social Sustainability**

679 In light of the potential for the multiple gains detailed, we caution that maintaining social
680 sustainability is critical to support farmers' capacity to work together for such ends. Our data
681 shows some difficulties arising from reduced labour availability (concurring with Eriksen and
682 Selboe 2012). Most worryingly, we outline how farmers in the Conwy associate SI with a
683 competitive impetus, potentially undermining collaborative capacity by reducing conviviality
684 and exacerbating the reduction of farm workers (and farms in general) in a drive for efficiency.
685 As such, we caution that whilst collaboration can certainly work to support SI, the reverse may
686 not necessarily be true.

687

688 These concerns connect to wider arguments (explored in section 2) that position SI as a
689 productivist agenda, centred foremost on intensification. But the farmers' contentions suggest
690 that it is not only environmental objectives that are in danger of being marginalised if narrower
691 interpretations of SI are pursued. There are social dis-benefits which can arise if production
692 efficiencies are taken as the primary objective above all else. These points build on Loos et al.
693 (2014) to provide an expanded understanding of the role social sustainability within SI. Whilst
694 research and policy advocacy have begun to connect to questions of wellbeing and poverty as
695 part of an expanded social agenda for SI (Garnett et al. 2013), this paper deepens insights on
696 the connections between agricultural viability and community resilience, which have largely

697 been side-stepped in SI forums. Loos et al. (2014) draw attention to pressures for intensification
698 that can marginalise and dispossess poorer farmers in the Global South. Our findings point to
699 the consequences of similar pressures across Europe.

700

701 This connects with undeniably political questions over the future of rural livelihoods and the
702 contested rationales for farm subsidies and rural payment schemes here. Willingness to provide
703 social welfare and community supports as a component of farm policy has come under
704 increasing scrutiny across the UK (Potter and Wolf 2014) with notably fraught discussions
705 emerging in areas of marginalised agriculture and consequently higher vulnerability like Wales
706 (Wynne-Jones and Vetter 2018). This is particularly so now in the face of Brexit (Dwyer 2018).
707 Although some concession to the predicament of rural communities is apparent in Wales
708 (Griffiths 2018; WG 2018), policy aspirations for efficiencies that result in winners and losers
709 inevitably threaten social sustainability.

710

711 Past discussion of such threats in the European context often revolves around the unique
712 cultural value of small family farms and the landscapes they maintain (Ray 1998). We offer a
713 different perspective here in connecting to the SI agenda and the dynamics of collaboration, by
714 demonstrating that social protections are not separate from the attainment of production
715 innovations and environmental enhancements. This potentially reworks long acknowledged
716 understandings of multi-functionality within EU policy, where farm supports have been
717 maintained on the grounds of interconnections between the socio-cultural, environmental and
718 productive dimensions (Potter and Tilzey 2005). Whilst the championing of ‘multi-
719 functionality’ has been critiqued as a bifurcated strategy (Rønningen and Flemsæter 2016),
720 producing a divided farm landscape of ‘intensive’ and ‘traditional’ producers, greater
721 appreciation of the inter-connections between SI outcomes could help us to move beyond this.

722 Unpicking these forms of connectivity could also speak to calls for a more substantive rethink
723 of the framings that SI is advancing (Rockström et al. 2017). As such our findings both confirm
724 a need for food security researchers to better engage with the tensions and imperatives of social
725 sustainability, but also to ensure that a genuinely integrated conception of SI is pursued moving
726 forwards.

727

728

729 **Acronyms**

730 SI Sustainable Intensification

731 SIP Sustainable Intensification Platform

732 Defra Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

733 LFA Less Favoured Area

734

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932

933 **Tables**

934 **Table 1: Respondent frequencies by age, farm size and farm type (adapted from**
 935 **Wheeler et al. 2018)**

936

Participant age		Farm size		Farm type	
Under 45	30	Small (<50ha)	39	LFA grazing livestock	71
45-54	71	Medium (50-99ha)	41	Cereals	62
55-64	76	Large (100-199ha)	64	Lowland grazing livestock	59
65 +	64	Very large (200-499ha)	66	Dairy	18
Missing Data	3	Ultra Large (500ha +)	33	Mixed	17
		Missing Data	1	General cropping	16
				Missing Data	1
Total	244		244		244

937

938 **Table 2:** Farmers’ main reasons for collaborating, and the main benefits derived (modified
 939 from Morris et al 2017)

Factor	% of all respondent s reporting factor as a motivation	% of Conwy area farmers reporting factor as a motivation	% of all respondent s reporting factor as a benefit	% of Conwy area farmers reportin g factor as a benefit
Economic				
Costs/prices/income/efficiency/profit	48	46	52	34
Access to resources – (Labour/land/sires/grazing/stores)	26	14	32	17
Environmental	5	0	3	0
Social				
Bargaining power – influence	4	9	2	6
Knowledge exchange / social learning	13	3	25	34
Mutual support/ Neighbourliness/Community/	27	26	28	37

ⁱ See <http://www.siplatform.org.uk/what-si> [last accessed 26/9/19]

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.siplatform.org.uk/farming-collaboration> [last accessed 26/9/19]

ⁱⁱⁱ In the research reported on here we asked farmers about *cooperation* and *joint working*, although we use the term collaboration in the paper as a more encompassing term. Further detail on, and our rationale for, the different forms of collaborative work included in the research is outlined in the methods.

^{iv} [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Share_of_the_labour_force_directly_working_on_farms,_by_economic_size_of_farm,_2013_\(%25_of_total_AWUs\).png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Share_of_the_labour_force_directly_working_on_farms,_by_economic_size_of_farm,_2013_(%25_of_total_AWUs).png) [last accessed 26/9/19]

^v For example, whilst an average 40% of agricultural produce came to market across Europe through cooperatives in 2012, in the UK this was only 25% (Bijman and Iliopoulos 2014). Data compiled by Cogeca, for 2013, also shows that UK cooperative turnover is half the average for the EU 28 (Cogeca 2013, p23).

^{vi} Cooperatives UK report 416 agricultural cooperatives, involving 134,566 workers, in 2016. The ONS reported the UK's agricultural labour force to be 346,000 in 2015-16. See <https://www.uk.coop/agri/uks-agricultural-co-operative-sector> [last accessed 26/9/19]

^{vii} As the list of 'SI activities' they were asked about did not include any specifically collaborative practices our discussion here focuses instead upon the survey responses which do pertain directly to collaboration. 'Sustainable intensification' was not pre-defined in the survey, and farmers' asked instead for their own interpretations.

^{viii} Respondents were sent an opt-out letter giving five working days to opt-out of further contact. They were then invited to participate via telephone until the target of 35 for each area was reached.

^{ix} Respondents were asked "Are you involved, either formally or informally, in any of the following forms of cooperation/joint working with other farmers?" and then a pre-defined list read out. Farmers were given the option to add additional activities not included on the given list. The response of 'Do not regard as cooperation/joint working' was an option alongside 'currently involved', 'previously involved', 'considering involvement'.

^x With regards to SI, farmers were given a narrative written from the perspective of the Defra Chief Scientist. Entitled 'Rising to the challenge of Sustainable Intensification,' the narrative positions SI as a broad societal challenge framed around meeting global demand for food whilst minimizing environmental impacts.

^{xi} See

<http://gov.wales/topics/environmentcountryside/farmingandcountryside/cap/ruraldevelopment/wales-rural-development-programme-2014-2020/sustainable-management-scheme/?lang=en> [last accessed 26/9/19]

^{xii} In the European Union, less-favoured area (LFA) is a term used to describe an area with natural handicaps (lack of water, climate, short crop season and tendencies of depopulation), or that is mountainous or hilly, as defined by its altitude and slope.

^{xiii} Whilst machinery sharing can be done through formalised 'rings', their numbers have waned in recent years (see <https://www.fwi.co.uk/business/how-healthy-are-the-uk-s-machinery-rings> [last accessed 26/9/19]). The reporting here suggests that many farmers are continuing to share machinery on a more ad-hoc and less formalised manner.

^{xiv} We attained data on farmers' motivations and the benefits perceived from collaboration through open response questions. These data were then coded into key themes arising and grouped as either social, economic or environmental. Respondents could raise more than one factor.

^{xv} It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all the trends in the data but see Morris et al. 2017 for more comprehensive reporting.

^{xvi} Farmers were asked for the main enablers for co-operation. Their responses were analysed and assigned to categories: organisation and governance, social factors and economic factors. Farmers could mention more than one theme.