

British farming, diversity and racism

Ped Asgarian takes an honest look at diversity in British farming and how institutions like the Soil Association need to change

British farming reflects our institutionally racist society. In fact, it's statistically worse because farming is the least diverse sector in the UK (followed closely by the environmental sector), with 98.6 per cent of farm managers and owners white British. Farm workers, on the other hand, are a much more ethnically diverse mix. If you are of a BAME background and want one of the top jobs, you have to work harder and face more rejections than your white counterparts.

But we already knew this, didn't we? We all go to meetings, seminars and conferences that are organised by white people seemingly for white people. I've lost count of the amount of times I've attended events, discussions and steering groups in Bristol about food and farming where I am the only non-white person – and have to make a point of it because everyone else is blind to that fact.

So, where does that leave us? We, who claim to champion people and the planet through our farming techniques and practices, have left many behind. This is the stark reality that

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all sections of UK farming need to recognise, accept and then begin to have the difficult and open conversations about why.

How do we start to change this?

I would look to the leaders – organisations that have a platform and a voice. Organisations like the Soil Association and NFU are influencers, innovators and industry flag bearers that can make a difference. Which is why I feel let down by their silence and inaction. On being asked to write this piece about diversity in food and farming,



I went to the Soil Association's website to find their statement in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. It was disappointingly difficult to find, and even more disappointing to read: "Recent events have highlighted one aspect of discrimination, that of race. It has shocked the world, us included." And "We have long recognised that farming and the environment are not as inclusive and accessible as we would like them to be."

I wonder what shocked them? One thing that we are all aware of is that this is not new. What we need to see is an ability to listen and act appropriately. They need to recognise and understand their own complicity in maintaining the status quo. People look to these organisations for direction and validation. If we are going to make farming a more diverse and inclusive sector, then those that hold the power need to acknowledge their mis-steps and be accountable to better governance.

The NFU and Soil Association are – and have been – very white organisations: white boards, white management teams. This creates barriers and an unconscious bias to making the industry less inclusive. It dictates the language, the behaviour, the ideology.

This needs to change.

I take heart from reading Sustain's statement on racial injustice in the food system: "We acknowledge that we do not currently reflect the ethnic diversity of the country, nor the capital city in which our office is based. We also acknowledge our own racial and socio-economic privilege." There is a strong recognition and awareness of the changes they can make and how they can be visibly better. We need large organisations to not only acknowledge the issues, but be aware of their own complicity in creating the industry we work in. They can then make the changes that will drive equality, diversity and inclusion throughout our food system.

If we don't see this change, then people of colour and different ethnicities will continue to turn away from these organisations. We are not just here to be the ones that work in the fields or be at the sharp end of food insecurity and poverty. We too are here to co-create a better future. **OF**

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