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FARMER MANAGERIAL SOVEREIGNTY: AN INTERNATIONAL ISSUE GLIMPSED IN KENYA & THE UK

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NB. This work is original, has been done by us with fieldwork in Kenya and the UK, and has not been published elsewhere.

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Abstract

Decision-making is a crucial component of farm management. Farmers may choose to cede decision-making to others inside or outside their businesses (as specialists, contractors or consultants). However, their decision-making may be [or may feel] usurped against their will. This Paper explores Farmer Managerial Sovereignty (FMS). FMS is about the extent to which decision-making is freely and flexibly in the hands of practical farmers and farm managers at farm level rather than with bureaucrats, policymakers, the suppliers of their inputs and/or the buyers of their outputs. This paper explores whether or not FMS has changed over the past two decades, and if so, how? Do farmers/farm managers in Kenya feel more or less change in FMS over these past two decades than those in the UK or vice versa? Two somewhat eclectic samples of 24 contrasting farmers/farm managers from Kenya and 24 from the UK were asked to provide indicative responses: Kenyan farmers felt FMS only lessening somewhat, notably due to increased government bureaucracy and public scrutiny. The UK sample aggregate FMS score indicated a much lessened to lessened overall FMS during the past two decades, especially due to increasing environmental rules, pesticide limitations, increased government bureaucracy and public scrutiny.

Keywords: farmer; managerial; sovereignty; decisions; choices; freedom.

Introduction

Good decision-making lies at the heart of farm management. Giles and Stansfield (1980) note with some sympathy that someone has defined farm management as 'the art of making good decisions based on inadequate information.' To some extent the quality of

that information depends upon that farm's previous record-keeping! However, that farm management is an art is agreed by Press (RSA Businessman of 1980) who defines management as 'the greatest of the arts since its medium is human talent itself.' Earlier, St Benedict (c.530 AD) advised, 'If you act always after hearing the counsel of others, you will avoid the need to repent of your decision afterwards!' This was no doubt based not only on his experience but derived from founding that upon the Bible's Book of Proverbs (11:14): 'Where no counsel is, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety'. Hardaker (1969) advocated the decision-tree approach to systematic farm management decision-making. Thus, the concept of complete autonomy in decision-making as a totally independent dictator is not a worthy aspiration and leads to ruin. However, there is balance, and the ability to make decisions free from unnecessary constraints, and then to take responsibility for them lies at the heart of the concept of Farmer Managerial Sovereignty (FMS). Nevertheless, a wise farmer or farm manager takes account of shrewd advice and informed opinions of team members, notably including family members.

Most farm businesses are family businesses and are small by contrast with many other industrial firm structures (Gasson *et al*, 1988). Farming still occupies over 35% of the world's workforce. Indeed, there are some 500 million farming families worldwide of which over 80% farm areas under 2 ha (Lowder *et al*, 2014). Family farmers are reckoned to work a significant proportion of the world's agricultural land:- Africa(62%); America North & Central (83%); America South (18%); Asia (85%); Europe 68%) according to FAO, 2014.

Characteristics of the Family Farm have been summarised by Van der Ploeg (2013):

a. Controls main farm resources
b. Provides most of the farm labour
c. Exists between Family & Farm (=Farm-Household System – FAO, 1989)
d. Provides the farm family with part or all of its food and income
e. Provides place identity of home
f. Links past, present and future inter-generationally
g. Is a place of accumulated learning + experience (ITK)
h. Is where culture is applied and conserved in agricultural context
i. Aggregates with other Family Farms into the wider rural economy
j. Makes up an intrinsic part of the wider rural landscape.

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Decision-making features in all the above characteristics and is culturally influenced and thus variable. For instance, Garforth *et al* (2004) found significant variation in attitudes and behaviour between farm and farmer types when analysing knowledge transfer among livestock farmers in south-west England. The adventurous entrepreneur may well take bold decisions but, if wise, even then will not do so without proper risk management assessment and due consultation. While the current nominated 'farmer' in a family business may consider himself or herself 'independent' as far as decision-making is concerned, this may be far from the case in practice. The extent to which decisions are shared and determined by consensus varies with individuals, cultures and from family to family.

The Nature of Decision-making at Farm Level

Decision-making is a crucial component of farm management; some may say it is the key factor both in terms of strategic (longer term) and tactical (shorter term) decisions. The skill and judgement required to achieve best practice in farm management are certainly reflected in the quality of decision-making.

There is a sequence in decision-making (after Giles & Stansfield, 1980): identify the problem/challenge →assess its significance → consider alternatives → gather information →evaluate options → make choice(s) →implement the decision →check results → take responsibility for those results. Obviously attitudes vary from farmer to farmer but that of one farmer (Watson, 2018; www.riverford.co.uk) seems to express due ethically-sensitive humility and to encapsulate universally applicable farm management wisdom: "Decisions that don't use what feels right as a sanity check can be just as dangerous as emotional decisions made without checking the measurable evidence."

In Nigeria, 70% of smallholder farmers out of 95% that feed the nation are women, according to the Federal Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Audu Ogbe (*Daily Trust*, Oct.28th 2018). According to the World Farmers' Organisation (www.wfo-oma.org in 2018) though women in Kenya carry out a similar percentage of farm work at around 70%, they own only some 5% of land; yet empowering women has been shown to increase farm productivity in many countries. The World Bank has made gender equality in the agriculture and food sector an explicit goal. The Bank works to expand women's access to land and rural finance. Providing women with greater access to land, finance,

and production inputs is critical to closing the productivity gap between men and women. Closing the gender gap could increase yields on women-run farms by 20-30% (World Bank, 2017). In the UK, though registered female farmers are increasing, they are still well under 10% of all farmers.

The Meaning of Sovereignty

Sovereignty means unrestricted freedom, power and authority to make choices and take responsibility for decisions. At a country level, sovereignty is about the ability of each nation to make its own decisions independently of other nations (though with due regard for their well-being also). Recovery of national sovereignty was a leading motivation for the UK's vote in 2016 for Brexit from the European Union. Regarding food sovereignty, the concerted voice of small farmers sounded the alarm on the need for it (La Via Campesina, 1996). Food sovereignty is about reclaiming decisions about food production policy at national and even regional levels (Windfuhr & Jonsén, 2005). Food sovereignty thus implies individuals', peoples', communities' and countries' authority to define their own agricultural, labour, fishing, food, land and water management policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances (Pimbert, 2009). Agroecology inspires it.

Farmer Managerial Sovereignty

Farmer Managerial Sovereignty (FMS) arises as a focal category within the globally growing food sovereignty movement. FMS is the freedom to make both day-to-day tactical and longer term strategic decisions and choices in a minimally constrained way. Of course, due respect for other people, creatures and the land itself is the assumed foundational context for that freedom. Farmers are constrained as business operators by three principal categories (Cottington, 2018). These are their own cultural and personal aspirations; the regulatory and contractual context in which they operate; and their 'bottom line' financial resilience, which enables the other two. Within the contracts and regulations category will come the environmental requirements of public goods. This is the category which may be most likely to limit FMS depending on how realistic these are and how well communicated to farmers (Fig.1).

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Fig. 1. Majors Drivers affecting the Farmer as Business Operator (after Cottington).

Loss of farmers and thus the need for farmer conservation has long been an issue (Wibberley, 1992). In an era when the 'five freedoms' of livestock in an animal welfare context are accepted (UK Animal Welfare Act, 2006), what about these applied to farmers and farm managers in relation to FMS? The five freedoms recognise the needs of livestock as follows: a suitable environment; a suitable diet; to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns; to be housed with, or apart from, other animals; to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease. At a time of renewed emphasis on mental health, including that of farmers (Banks & Lloyd, 2013; www.fcn,org.uk) it is surely relevant to consider farmer well-being in regard to FMS. In the UK, anecdotal evidence is regularly gleaned among struggling farmers and farm businesses that bureaucracy coupled with feelings of loss of control to others are increasing stressors (Jones *et al*, 2015). On the other hand, some decisions may be voluntarily, deliberately and even keenly ceded to specialist advisers or contractors such as employed agronomists and dairy consultants by progressive farmers. For instance, while saving the wages of a full-time dairyman, a UK farmer who has installed robotic milking for his 110 cows now employs a dairy consultant costing the equivalent of 25% of a full-time monthly wage and willingly cedes responsibility for key decisions to him. This is also the case with agreed salad and vegetable delivery contracts ex-farm. Hence this enquiry and the sampling of farmers' opinions regarding whether there are increasingly imposed restrictions on FMS in two contrasting contexts, Kenya and the UK.

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Methodology

On the basis that to discover rural realities one should 'ask the fellows who cut the hay' (Evans, 1975), and that an axiom of good management is to ask practitioners' opinions, the authors decided to conduct two sample surveys of opinion among 24 farmers in Kenya and 24 farmers in the UK as to how FMS may have changed during the past two decades. Though eclectically selected, there was an attempt in both samples to mirror the reality of average farmer's age and gender in both particular countries. The questionnaire used was similar for both countries (Appendix 1). The data generated are only indicative but it is hoped that they provide at least a discussion starter if not a research prompter for this issue. Thus, by reference to two small and eclectic samples of 24 farmers in each of Kenya and the UK, this paper seeks to explore Farmer Managerial Sovereignty and whether or not it is perceived to be increasing or decreasing in a series of categories inviting responses from farmers and farm managers. Though the samples were eclectically drawn, there was an attempt to represent a spectrum of farmers and to reflect some typical contrasts between Kenya and the UK (Fig.2.).

Fig.2. Characteristics of the Kenyan and UK Farmers sampled (n=48)

n = 24 + 24 Kenya + UK farms = 48	**KENYA mean**	Max.	Min.	**UK mean**	Max.	Min.
AGE OF FARMER	50.6	70	25	58.2	84	33
% FEMALE FARMERS	50.0	-	-	12.5	-	-
AREA FARMED (Hectares)	0.2	1.2	0.1	420	1497	81
% CEREALS	37.0	70.0	0	28.1	100	0
% FIELD VEGETABLES	18.0	63.6	0	2.1	30.0	0
% SALAD CROPS	6.0	30.0	0	0.7	0.7	0
% OTHER CROPS	-	-	-	6.2	40.0	0
% BEEF	2.5	40.0	0	22.4	100.0	0
% SHEEPMEAT	3.2	40.0	0	4.5	50.0	0
% PIGMEAT	2.1	30.0	0	2.5	60.0	0
% POULTRYMEAT	10.0	40.0	0	1.0	35.0	0
% EGGS	5.1	30.0	0	1.0	35	0
% MILK	12.0	75.0	0	19.4	93	0
% OTHER	4.1	40.0	0	12.1	35.0	0

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The Kenya sample was drawn from within Siaya County in south-western Kenya bordering Lake Victoria, while the UK sample was from England north, south, east and west and even included Scotland. Notable contrasts are in farm size (more than 4,000-fold greater in the UK). The percentage female farmers in the Kenya sample at 50% is actually below the Kenya national average, while the UK sample at 12.5% is above the UK average. The age of the farmers sampled in Kenya at 51 is typical while for the UK, the mean age of the sample at 58 is at the often-quoted UK average. While only 36 % of the interviewed farmers in Kenya had not gone beyond primary education (indicating a reasonable level of literacy), all of the UK sample had completed post-secondary (college/university) education, and some had done postgraduate studies. Both groups majored on cereals in arable farms and had useful contributions from milk. The Kenyan farmers derived much more of their remaining output from vegetables and poultry than in the UK sample. By contrast with Kenya, the UK sample derived significant income from beef, and more from non-farming contributions – notably property and EU Single Farm Payment.

Farmer Managerial Sovereignty assessment was based on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 1 representing less freedom of choice and 5 representing more freedom of choice. The responses of Kenyan farmers were ranked according to their degree of perceived freedom of choice as in Fig.3. Then the results for the UK were presented according to the same order of choices as smoothly ranked in Kenya, thus showing diagrammatically their variations by contrast (Fig.4).

Results and Discussion

In the case of Kenya: all the sample of 24 farmers asked their opinions on FMS were in Siaya County which borders Lake Victoria in the south-west of Kenya. Their holdings were typically small and dominated by cropping outputs, especially cereals but also substantially vegetables. The greatest constraints on their choices were deemed to arise from government bureaucracy, the burden of increasing public scrutiny, marketing rules beyond the farm gate, and environmental constraints and rules to determine public good – though only bureaucracy and public scrutiny burden scored below 2.5 on the Likert Scale.

Fig. 3. Farmer Managerial Sovereignty across different choice horizons in Kenya.

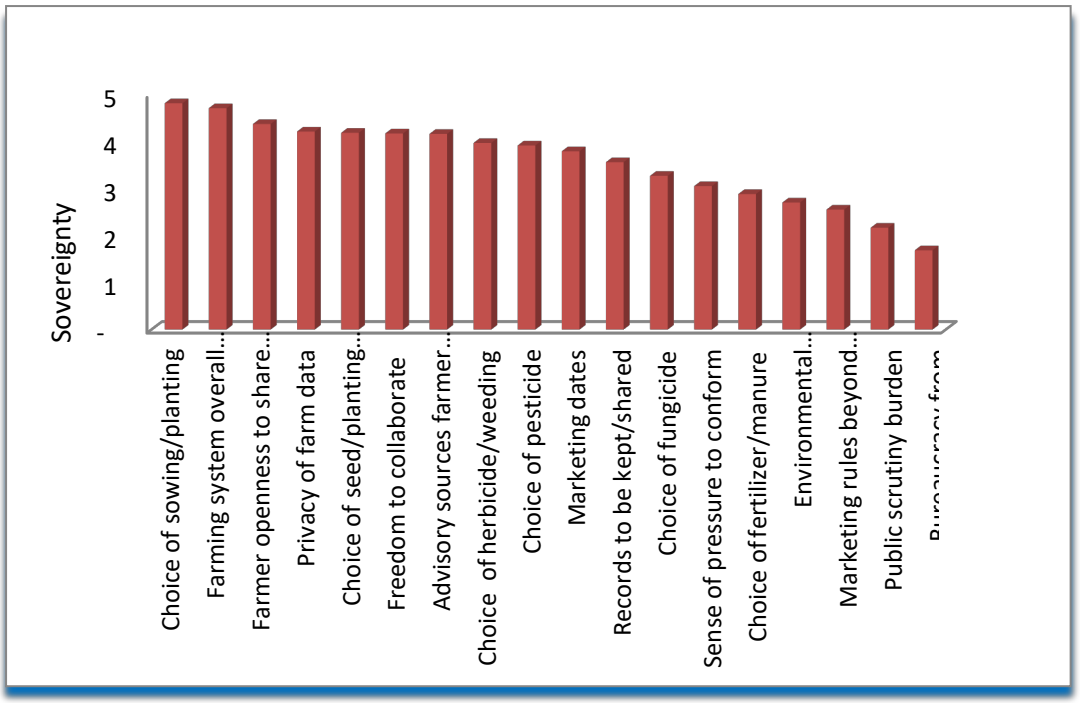
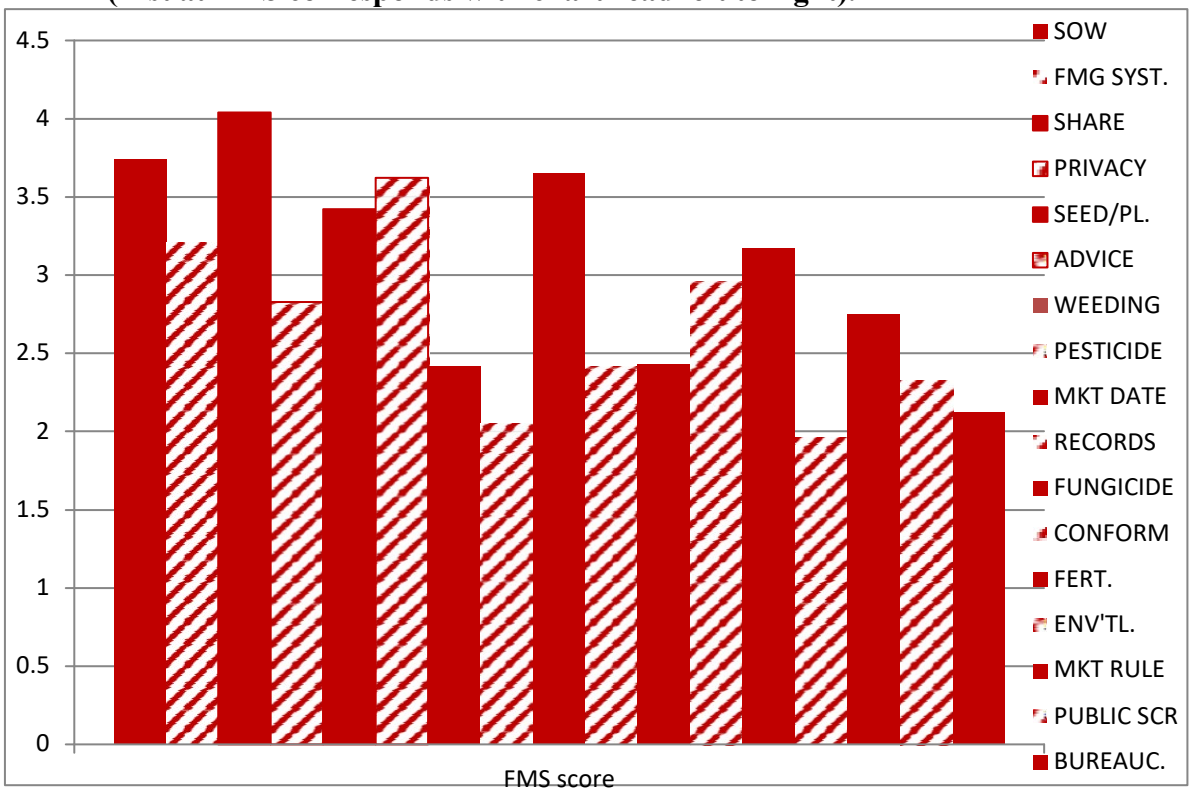


Fig. 4. Farmer Managerial Sovereignty across different choice horizons in the UK. (List at RHS corresponds with chart read left to right).



In the case of the UK: the sample of 24 farmers was drawn widely in terms of location, mostly in England but from all points of the compass. The farm sizes typify serious

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commercial farm businesses of varied types from arable, through mixed farming and dairying to specialist beef and sheep production in the uplands. Poultry was represented by a specialist organic day-old chick raising farm also producing some eggs and meat for sale. The greatest perceived constraints of the UK sample were environmental rules, pesticide limitations, government bureaucracy, increased public scrutiny and restricted herbicide choice – all five issues scoring below the 2.5 level on the Likert Scale. In the case of herbicide choice, this is not only a matter of restricted options but of exacerbated needs, especially in relation to blackgrass control (*Alopecurus myosuroides*) which is becoming more persistent with farmers' own choices to pursue intensive, early-sown winter cereal sequences, and also with development of some herbicide resistance.

The overall aggregated FMS score for Kenya was 3.61 i.e. indicating FMS only lessening somewhat, whereas the UK sample aggregate score was 2.88 indicating a much lessened to lessened overall FMS during the past two decades.

The wider context in Kenya includes the devolution of policy and encouragements for development to Counties in recent years (County Governments Act, 2012), while in the UK Brexit was voted for in 2016 by many farmers not only on grounds of recovering national sovereignty but based on a feeling that remote bureaucracy and policymakers' rulings were usurping their freedom to make on-farm choices and decisions – such as stocking rates, grazing periods and fieldwork timing. The results of the enquiry reported here indicate the relative strength of feeling among farmers in the two contrasting nations of Kenya and the UK. However, the strength of feeling regarding loss of sovereignty is greatest among the UK sample – although most variable among farmers within that sample with aggregate FMS scores per farmer ranging from 1.91 (FMS very much lessened) to 4.28 (FMS the same). The UK farmers deemed some items better than experienced two decades ago, such as choice of advisory sources and opportunities to collaborate scoring higher on FMS. The Kenyan farmers considered that farming system choices, openness to share among farmers, sources of advice and willingness to collaborate among farmers had all improved in their experience.

One UK farmer in organic production for 18 years, noted that the burden of regulation is slightly less onerous than for conventional farming i.e. less recording of inputs used, exemption from some bureaucratic and restrictive cropping rules, and being less affected by input cost inflation. An upland tenant farmer in the UK noted less choice

at farm level regarding decisions, mostly down to having to abide by endless new rules and an ever smaller pool of available tools (particularly spray chemicals). However, he noted that there are some very exciting technologies and ideas becoming available.

On the National Trust Estate in the UK, when land is taken back in hand by the NT and re-let for grazing, it tends to be micro-managed by a Conservation Ranger team with regard to stocking dates and numbers; then fertiliser, lime, sprays and sometimes even sheep may be seen, for the most part, as unacceptable on in-hand land. Thus FMS is reduced for farmers who choose to take the grazing on that land. Furthermore, Brexit in the UK is a very concerning issue if a tenanted farm happens to be coming to the end of an AHA tenancy (Agricultural Holdings Act, 1986), to be replaced with a FBT (Farm Business Tenancy, as per the 1995 Act) – which is shorter term and less secure.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Perceived managerial sovereignty of farmers in the Kenyan sample has improved over the last decade with respect to a number of farm decisions. However, Farmer Managerial Sovereignty is still restricted when it comes to bureaucracy from government, public scrutiny, marketing rules beyond the farm gate and environmental constraints/rules which are considered to determine the public good. In the UK, Brexit is influencing the responses of some farmers although a majority are keen to leave the FMS constraints of the EU. Overall, the UK farmers sampled perceive their FMS to be lessened to a greater extent than is the case in Kenya.

The issue of Farmer Managerial Sovereignty needs to be pursued as a relevant concept, investigated further and researched in other places. The voices of farmers and farm managers and their mental health and well-being, need to be better registered among policy-makers and those who are most likely to constrain FMS unnecessarily. It must always be realised that FMS is not a concept seeking absolute autocracy and thus is not a threat to responsible land husbandry and management but rather the guarantor of it in the hands of enabled practitioners.

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Appendix 1. FARMER MANAGERIAL SOVEREIGNTY (FMS)

Sovereignty is about the ability of each nation to make its own decisions independently of other nations (though with due regard for their well-being also). **Food sovereignty** is about reclaiming decisions about food production policy at national and even regional levels. **Farmer Managerial Sovereignty** (**FMS**) is about **the extent to which decision-making is freely and flexibly in the hands of practical farmers and farm managers** rather than with bureaucrats, the suppliers of their inputs and/or the buyers of their outputs. Has **FMS** changed over the past two decades? If so, in which ways? Do farmers/farm managers in the **UK** feel more or less change in **FMS** over these past two decades than those in **Kenya**? Two somewhat eclectic samples of contrasting farmers/farm managers from the UK and Kenya are asked to provide indicative material towards the debate about this legitimate topic on the *loci* of **farm management decision-making**.

Brief Description of your Farming:-

YOUR AGE (years)?____; Male or Female? Acres?___

YOUR FARM PRODUCTS	**TICK** THOSE THAT APPLY	WHAT **%** OF YOUR TOTAL FARM OUTPUT VALUE?
CEREALS		
FIELD VEGETABLES (INCL. POTATOES)		
SALAD CROPS		
OTHER CROPS – WHICH?		
BEEF		
SHEEPMEAT		
PIGMEAT		
POULTRY MEAT		
EGGS		
MILK		
OTHER –PLEASE STATE		

IS **FMS** VERY MUCH LESS (i.e. have farmers lost control), TO SAME, TO MORE? PLEASE *GRADE* THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS BY **TICKING** THE APPROPRIATE COLUMN AGAINST EACH ONE:-

ASPECT	VERY MUCH LESS Free at Farm level	MUCH LESS Free at Farm level	LESS Free at Farm level	SAME at Farm level	MORE Free at Farm level
Choice of Sowing/Planting date					
Choice of Seed/planting material					
Choice of fertilisers/manures					
Choice of herbicides/weeding					
Choice of pesticides					
Choice of fungicides					
Environmental constraints/rules					
Marketing dates					
Marketing rules beyond farm gate					
Advisory sources farmer can use					
Privacy of farm data					
Records to be kept/shared					
Bureaucracy from government					
Public scrutiny burden					
Sense of pressure to conform					
Freedom to collaborate					
Farmer open-ness to share info.					
Farming System overall choice					

Thank You for participating – PN/EJW, 2018

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