Farm Hack Survey 2020: Initial findings from the Farm Hack UK network

Main findings

This research is the first of its kind to assess the development and impacts of the Farm Hack UK network. It found evidence of a thriving network based on horizontal exchange of knowledge and experiential learning. Highlights include:

- **High participant satisfaction**: with 86% of respondents saying the events had a positive impact on their practice, and 95% saying they are planning to attend another event in the future.

- **Strong link between social and practical benefits**: respondents highly rated both the practical benefits of the events alongside the social networking benefits.

- **Concrete suggestions for improvement**: while respondents were overwhelmingly positive, some key areas were identified for improvement including, requests to include training in facilitation and more accessible locations for Farm Hack events.

Background: Farm Hack UK

Farm Hack first came to the UK in 2015 and since then there have been a further eleven events, including two Soil Hacks and three Lady Hacks (aka ‘The Women’s Farmworking Weekend’). Among other things, these events have aimed to create a community of collaborators to share knowledge and skills for a more just and sustainable food system in the UK. The purpose of this research is to find out what the impacts of the movement have been so far and what it could do to improve in the future.

![Tool ‘show and tell’ at Farm Hack Leeds (2020)](image)

**Figure 1.** Survey participation by Farm Hack. NB. some respondents attended multiple events.
The research was designed in collaboration between Farm Hack organisers, The Landworkers’ Alliance, and researchers at the Centre for Agroecology Water and Resilience and the Sustainable Places Institute. As well as giving an indication of the impacts of the network so far, results from this survey will be used to inform future event planning, as well to help draft a guide to putting on Farm Hacks which is planned for release in 2021. The survey was completed by 43 people, representing 71 individual attendances (12% of an estimated 590 across 11 events).

Who attended?

The survey results paint an interesting picture of Farm Hack attendees with over half of respondents being women (46% vs. 34% men), ranging in age from 24 to 76 (average age of 43), and living all over mainland Britain (see heat map below). Of the farmers surveyed, almost two thirds (63%) had been farming for 5 years or less. This suggests a predominance of ‘new entrants’, and in addition to the large age range (52 years) indicates a strong intergenerational aspect to the knowledge sharing.

Why did they attend?

Overwhelmingly, respondents attended in order to acquire or share knowledge about ‘agricultural skills and knowledge’ (59% of respondents’ first choices). Despite this practical focus, on average fun/socialising and strengthening social networks then came as second most important reasons for attending. Respondents showed a keen interest in learning about political and social movements (23%). This pattern was seen elsewhere, suggesting a strong relation between practical and political learning in the network.

Impacts

Farm Hack had a recognisable impact on attendees with 86% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it had a positive impact on their farming, growing or professional practice. These improvements came from feeling:

- more knowledgeable about sustainable farming and growing practices (79%) by gaining skills through hands-on activities and being exposed to different ideas and models;
- and better connected with other farmers and growers (88%) through developing social connections and networks with others around a common purpose.

“Through the Soil Hack and Lady Hack events I have attended strong social bonds were built […] This network has gone on to offer advice, information, knowledge, skills, practical support which has directly impacted my confidence, positive mental health, choices of on farm practices etc all of which have had a positive impact on my growing as a practitioner and my growing as an individual…”
**What impact does Farm Hack have on practice?**

Overall, of those who attended Farm Hacks 85% observed an impact in a specific area of their practice as a consequence (see figure 3). The area where attendees experienced most improvements (57%) was *Infrastructure and tools* followed by *Social* aspects (55%) and *Organisational* aspects (46%). However, a majority of participants felt either uncertain of whether their economic practices had improved or that it was not applicable with a further 17% expressing that it definitely hadn’t improved their practices.

- **Confidence** One reason for the improvements was the increased confidence that attending Farm Hack gave attendees, 60% felt more confident in their profession or vocation after attending. This came a large part from meeting like-minded people and seeing how ideas were being put into action in different projects.

- **Hands-on activities** When asked which aspects they liked the most, participants strongly favoured practical activities like the skillshares, workshops, and tool demonstrations and to a lesser extent the build projects and talks/lectures. Group project planning was not prioritised by many people reflecting the fact that fewer people attended to address a particular problem.

- **Skills and knowledge** The skills and knowledge mentioned as most impactful were soil health and tool maintenance and use. Others also found it useful to practice and reflect on their communication and facilitation skills, gain knowledge in business management and models, and learn about seed saving practices. Several gave examples of how they had implemented knowledge learned from specific demonstrations or workshops in their own projects and the ideas that continued to inform their practice.

**What impact does Farm Hack have on social networks and connectedness?**

When asked what attendees loved the most, it was by far the **social connectedness around a common purpose**. People found Farm Hacks to be fun, inspiring and engaging, and really liked the informal, inclusive, participatory atmosphere. Informal conversation was the second most ranked aspects of the events reflecting the fact that fun/socialising and strengthening social networks where important reasons for attending.

Creating social networks and strengthening social bonds was seen as one of the most important outcomes. Many spoke of these networks continuing after the event and offering a useful space for advice, support and inspiration which continued to impact their work. They felt part of a bigger movement and developed stronger connections with

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“Seeing other women leading thriving independent farm projects has inspired me and boosted my confidence in my personal ability to succeed in this industry. [Lady Hack] brought a number of people together from different regions, so the opportunity to make new contacts in other counties and on different farms or in related sectors has been invaluable…”
like-minded producers and growers which both increased confidence and motivated them. In the case of Lady Hack, some commented that hearing the experiences of other women and queer people in farming inspired and motivated them to continue in the sector. Several participants also spoke about their increased awareness about the connection with wider issues and movements.

**What impact does Farm Hack have on teaching/facilitation?**

There was a clear interest in teaching and facilitation amongst Farm Hack attendees and a belief that events should be participatory and inclusive.

This was evident too in the proportion of attendees that considered themselves ‘educators’ (66%). This reflected the ambition of the network as a collaborative space for horizontal exchange of information.

Of those who considered themselves educators, 78% agreed or strongly agree that it had an impact on their approach to teaching or knowledge exchange. The largest area of improvement was seen to be participant inclusion (81%). Additionally, 70% or more felt it had improved their confidence, motivation, and facilitation skills.

However, this did not always translate into good facilitation and inclusion within events. Facilitation was one of the lowest ranked aspects for participants and a small proportion of participants felt that there hadn’t been opportunities for engagement and involvement. This is reflected in the fact that around half of those who saw themselves as educators had not seen an improvement in their communication skills or awareness of teaching resources signalling that there could be scope for further support and training in this area.

**Future of Farm Hack UK**

While respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their experience, there were some areas highlighted as in need of improvement. In particular, the inaccessibility of the events, both in terms of location (venue) and - to a lesser extent - in terms of inclusivity. Respondents offered tangible solutions for ways to make these improvements, including selecting venues in more geographically central or urban areas and by offering facilitation training during Farm Hack events to improve skills in running practical events for participants of varying skill and experience level.

“Better quality of facilitation - perhaps training sessions offered for people learn how to include participants”

“We need a fully interactive process for the planning, timetabling, content and delivery.”
There were also calls for more Farm Hacks, with even more pronounced regional and sector-focused character. Overall the survey suggests a deeply felt need for knowledge exchange and training of this type which provides a vital combination of learning and social networking. Looking forward to the Farm Hack guide and the future of Farm Hacks in general, we also identified the following priorities for anyone considering getting involved in farm hacks:

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<th>Offer training in facilitation</th>
<th>Keep Farm Hack affordable</th>
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<td>This was by far the biggest issue for attendees, with some complaining that specific workshops or build processes could have run smoother, or have been more inclusive. As a number of participants suggested this could be done with ‘train the trainer’ sessions built into each Farm Hack.</td>
<td>Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Farm Hack events were good value for money, with tickets prices offered on a sliding scale in some cases. This was made possible by farms agreeing to host events for free - continuing this approach not only makes things affordable but also helps to build solidarity.</td>
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<th>Create space for the next Farm Hack</th>
<th>Consider location and accessibility</th>
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<td>Respondents repeatedly highlighted the importance of ‘longer term collaboration on design and build’ often across multiple events. This can be done by creating space during one Hack to plan the next one, identifying those interested in organising and even brainstorming possible locations and venues.</td>
<td>While many were satisfied with the venue itself, many did complain about difficulties in getting to the site, or even hearing about the event in the first place. This could be improved by either choosing more geographically central locations, or organising more frequent regional events, near public transport links.</td>
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<th>Document project progress</th>
<th>Keep it practical (+ political)</th>
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<td>A big part of Farm Hack culture is about documenting tool plans and processes so that others can access them for free, all over the world. A number of participants suggested ‘better integrating’ the process of documentation as a way to create stronger links between events. Again, space could be made to begin this during each Hack, but also making sure someone is tasked with taking and sharing lots of good quality photos.</td>
<td>Farm Hack is undoubtedly a network focussed on practical skills and real-world problem solving. So It is perhaps unsurprising that participants called for more ‘hands-on' workshops and skill shares, noting that sessions often ‘booked up fast’. And while it is essential to offer lots of choice, and seek session proposals well in advance. It is also important to make space for political planning and learning. It is this combination that makes Farm Hack so unique.</td>
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Publication details

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