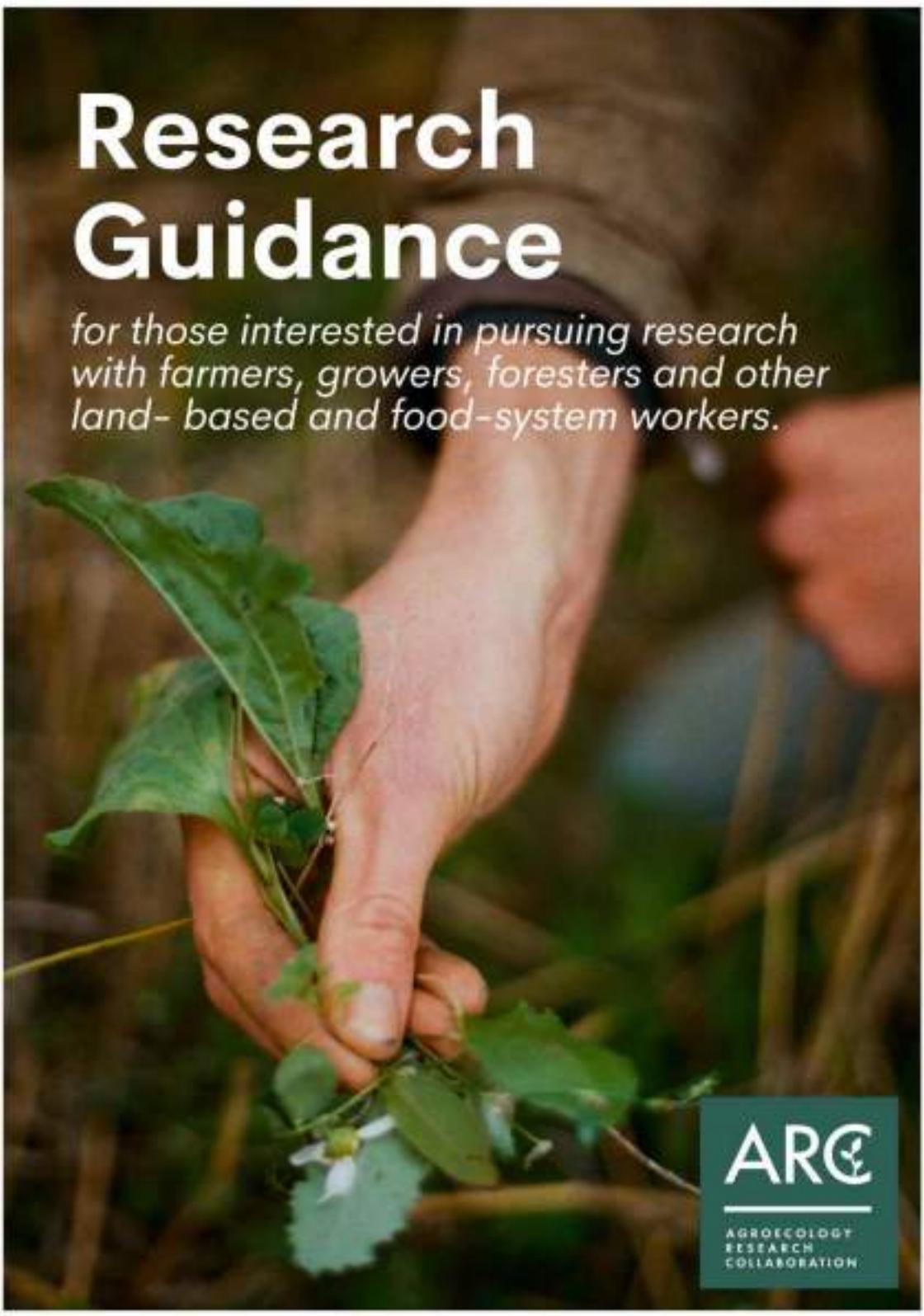


# Research Guidance

*for those interested in pursuing research  
with farmers, growers, foresters and other  
land-based and food-system workers.*

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a green plant with small white flowers. The background is a blurred field of tall grasses or reeds. The person is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and a watch on their left wrist.

ARC

AGROECOLOGY  
RESEARCH  
COLLABORATION



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## **Why do we need research?**

We are acutely aware of the need to access rigorously performed research to build a strong evidence base that demonstrates agroecology as a viable and long term alternative to the current industrial food and land-use system. Research underpins our work in various ways, from campaigning for policy change to developing practical land-management skills.

## **How do we want to engage with research?**

We are aware of the growing interest from researchers in the UK agroecology and food sovereignty movement. This interest has led to a significant rise in the research requests received by our organisations and members over recent years. As we have come to learn, research is a complex field, and our organisations and members have experienced issues such as knowledge extraction, research overload and requests to work on projects that do not, in the long-term, support our needs. However, we recognise that there is a growing effort within academia to shift the norms around what gets researched and how, and who sets research agendas. There is great potential for pushing forward the agroecology movement when our efforts are coordinated. We therefore want to engage in research that is built on the principles of mutual support and exchange.

Furthermore, many degree courses require an original piece of research as a dissertation, and students may be keen to use this opportunity to address a topic that is of value to a food, farming or forestry organisation. This is also an opportunity for grassroots organisations, who often have a long “wish list” of subjects requiring investigation. We welcome enquiries at an early stage in the process, to ensure that research ideas are developed in a mutually beneficial way.

## **How to use this document**

This booklet is an opportunity, for us, as grassroots organisations and agroecological practitioners, to communicate the constraints and possibilities we face when engaging with research. It is intended for all different levels of researchers, from undergraduate students to tenured professors, as well as those working in think-tanks and other organisations. We encourage you to read the booklet in full; it is a living document, meaning that as our relationship to research develops, so will the guidance we can provide.

## Key Considerations

In producing this document ARC member organisations have reflected on their previous engagement and experiences with research. From this, key areas have been identified that we feel need careful consideration before approaching practitioners and organisations to either develop or be involved in projects. For each topic we have tried to explain accurately the challenges faced and offer some reflections on how to navigate them.

### Research relationships

From the perspective of organisations and practitioners, research works best when there is a foundational relationship of trust and mutual exchange for projects to be built on. As organisations working together to build a food and land-use system that is just, sustainable, resilient and healthy for all, we are interested in developing a strong network of researchers who are keen to invest in maintaining long term relationships. However we are also keen to engage with BSc and MSc students who would like to undertake research that will contribute to our movement. We have a “wish list” of topics that it would be valuable to have researched

Building research relationships outside of specific projects is important. We encourage researchers working within the areas of food, farming and land-use systems to get in touch with ARC and its member organisations. Having introductory conversations where research interests, capacities and needs are shared is mutually beneficial. Furthermore, creating space to get to know each other, beyond the sphere of research, is integral and helps build accountability and trust into research relationships and projects.

#### *Reflection points:*

- *As a researcher, have you taken the time to introduce yourself, your research interests and your position towards working with grassroots organisations prior to proposing a research project?*
- *In what ways will relationships be nurtured and continued beyond the scope of a specific project?*

## Research process

### Topics

Often, when approached to be involved in a research project, there is a desire from the researcher(s) for the work “to be of use” to practitioners and organisations. However, there can be a disjuncture between the research topics that are of use to practitioners and organisations and the topics that research councils and academia will provide funding for.

Developing a project should be a joint process involving active participation and dialogue between all those involved in the research. Where a project has already been developed, and land-based workers and organisations are asked, at a later point, to join as a partner or participant, there should be clear space for honest discussion and feedback around the relevance of the research topic from different perspectives and positions.

### Methods

Practitioners and organisations may have ideas for topics that they wish to research, however they may not have a full understanding of the different methods, approaches and tools that could be used to gather and analyse data. Researchers are in the position to present the different methods that can be used to study a topic, and help guide others with less knowledge through the process.



### Outputs

Academic journal articles are one of the most common outputs of research, and although they are highly important when presenting evidence to government and other public bodies, they are not always the most accessible format for other audiences. It may be that shorter reports, videos, webinars, podcasts and other media would be better suited for some in accessing research data. Furthermore, it is worth considering how understandings of research outputs can be expanded to include such things as supporting organisations when engaging in policy discussions. Prior to undertaking any research, it would be beneficial to understand what outputs would be most useful to practitioners and organisations and ensure that these are centred alongside more traditional formats.

*Reflection points:*

- Have you met with organisations and practitioners to discuss their research needs and priorities?*
- Have you created space for feedback on the relevance of a research topic to practitioners and organisations?*
- If researchers are approached by a practitioner, have the different methods of study been explained and clearly communicated?*
- What outputs are you expecting from the research? Are these outputs also of use for practitioners and organisations? Have you discussed the different formats that research evidence can be presented in?*



## Capacity

Land-based work comes with seasonal time constraints that will affect how someone can engage with research. For growers and farmers early Spring to mid Autumn is often exceptionally busy, with winter often offering more time to engage in other projects. For foresters, coppice workers and other tree-based work, Autumn to early Spring are peak seasons, leaving more time in the Summer to engage in other work. It is important to understand that it may not be possible for land-based workers to engage in projects during certain parts of the year, and finding the right time of year to initiate a project is crucial. It is perhaps best to get in touch with individuals at the point of year that is least busy to initiate a project, particularly if there will need to be data collection during peak season.

In regards to engaging with organisations that represent land-based workers, many staff work part-time (whilst often doing part-time land-based work simultaneously) with already full workloads. This means that giving individuals adequate lead time on research proposals and projects is necessary. It is difficult for such individuals to respond to short deadlines, or to collaborate effectively just before a funding application or project proposal is due to be submitted.

### *Reflection points:*

- *If involving practitioners, does the research project fit with their working schedules?*
- *If data collection needs to be carried out during busy periods of the year, has there been clear conversation around what is expected of participants? And is there adequate support in place?*
- *If involving organisations, has enough time been factored into the project to account for the difference in work environments and schedules?*



## Language and communication

Academia often uses language that can feel inaccessible to those who are not within an academic institution. If there are documents that require input from research participants and partners, who do not sit within academia, it is important to use language and terminology that is appropriate, accessible and understandable.

It should also be discussed whether written documents are the most accessible and appropriate format for research proposals and findings. For research participants and partners there may be different ways of accessing this information that is preferred (e.g. podcasts, webinars, videos, face-to-face workshops). These options should be discussed and made available where possible.

At the beginning of any proposal or project there should also be a discussion around what forms and channels of communication work best for all involved. Various issues such as access to the internet and reliable connectivity in rural areas, time and capacity to work at a computer, phone signal and other such things can vary for all involved. Understanding what realistic expectations are for communications should be discussed and agreed upon (e.g. respond to any emails within 3-5 working days).

### *Reflection points:*

- *Are documents for research proposals and projects in an accessible format and language if project partners and participants need to, or wish to, read and contribute to them?*
- *Is it possible to meet with partners and participants to explain any technical language?*
- *What format are the research findings to be published in? Is this format of use to partners and participants? What format would be best suited for others?*
- *What are the various different options for communication during a research project? What are the participants' favoured options?*

## Research timeframes

The timeframes and time capacities in which practitioners, organisations and researchers operate can vary to a large degree. This has already been discussed more generally in the section on capacity above.

Further to the above point, it is worth noting that there can be a stark difference between the time frames in which academic research is carried out, and data made available, and the timeframes in which data is required by organisations and practitioners. Whilst we understand that it may be necessary for projects to be carried out over the course of 3-5 years, often organisations are dealing with situations (e.g. policy changes) that take place over much shorter time frames.

Before projects begin we would encourage conversations around how these different time frames can be taken into consideration and the research work can be organised to suit different needs.

### *Reflection points:*

- *What is the timeframe of the project that meets the researchers' needs? What is the timeframe of the project that meets practitioners and organisations' needs? How can the project accommodate both?*

## Expectations

Overall, having a clear understanding of what everyone's expectations are of the research project is essential. It is important to create a clear list of what is expected of researchers, participants, project partners etc. throughout the length of the project, as well as the roles and responsibilities that individuals will hold.

It is useful to have scheduled check-in meetings where individuals can voice any concerns they may be having with the project, or discuss any changes that may need to happen. Capacity of staff members working within grassroots organisations can fluctuate rapidly depending on external circumstances out of their control (e.g. sudden policy change), check-in meetings allow staff to communicate changes to their capacity, and therefore expectations can be better managed.

### *Reflection points:*

- *Is there a clear outline of what everyone's roles and responsibilities are within the project? Do these roles and responsibilities match the capacity of staff from organisations and land-based practitioners?*
- *Has space been created to ensure continuous feedback and reflection throughout the project?*

## Sensitivity

Research into farming and land-based work is, in a lot of cases, research into someone's livelihood. Land-based livelihoods in the UK are often precarious - individuals work long hours, often on low pay, sometimes with insecure tenancies, and their work is directly affected by such things as climate, biodiversity, water and societal crises. There are many different levels of insecurity and precarity - crops can fail, livestock can get ill, pests, diseases and extreme weather can decimate produce quickly. We fully agree with the need to raise critique and challenge ideas and practices through research, however, understanding when sensitivity is required, whilst providing critique, is also essential.

We also understand that researchers can be working in environments of insecurity and precarity. While we feel it is important that researchers have an accurate understanding of the working conditions and environments of land-based practitioners and grassroots organisations, and how this affects our engagement with research, we would also like to understand the context that researchers are working within, and any struggles and challenges they may be facing that will also affect research projects.

### *Reflection points:*

- *Has space been created for researchers and project partners and participants to get to know each other, and understand the different contexts they are all working in?*
- *How are trusting research relationships being cultivated within the project?*



<b>Key Consideration</b>	<b>Actions to be taken</b>
<b>Finance and funding</b>	
<b>Research process</b>	
<b>Capacity</b>	
<b>Language and communication</b>	
<b>Research time-frames</b>	
<b>Expectations</b>	
<b>Sensitivity</b>	

# Guidance for different levels of research

You may have a research project that you would like to contact organisations and practitioners about. We have indicated below the next steps to engaging with organisations and practitioners. Below we outline the level of engagement and support that organisations in our collaboration may be able to provide for different kinds of research.

## Undergraduate and Masters Research

- Depending on capacity, staff are often available and happy to have brief, initial conversations with students to help inform them of organisational position, interest and thoughts on research projects.
- Due to the number of requests we receive from undergraduate and masters students we cannot engage with these projects in a more collaborative way.
- Organisations may be able to offer ways of contacting practitioners if the student is looking for participants.
- Organisations may be keen to share findings with their membership base. Please offer the organisation a full copy or summary of the research report.

## PhD Research

- Organisations may be able to co-develop and co-supervise projects with PhD researchers. This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- Organisations may be able to offer ways of contacting and engaging with practitioners if the researcher is looking for participants.
- If a project is to be co-developed, organisations will likely require funding to be able to fully engage in this process. Budgetary questions should be addressed in initial conversations about the possibilities of project co-development.



## Post-doctoral and multi-stakeholder research

- Organisations may be able to co-develop projects with research teams. This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- For this kind of project, and the time required for organisations and practitioners to engage in this level of research, we would expect to have allocated finance for any staff and overhead costs.
- If the research project also required input from practitioners, organisations would be able to connect researchers to land-based workers.

## Other

If your research doesn't fit into any of these categories, or you are conducting research outside of traditional academic structures, please get in touch and we can discuss on a case-by-case basis what level of engagement might be possible.



## Next steps

If you have a proposal for a research project that you would like ARC member organisations to engage with, please fill in one of the following forms:

[Undergraduate and Masters Research Request Form](#)

[PhD Research Request Form](#)

[Other/ Post doc and multi-stakeholder Research Request Form](#)

Forms can be submitted to Tara Wight, ARC Research Coordinator, on [tara.wight@landworkersalliance.org.uk](mailto:tara.wight@landworkersalliance.org.uk)

Please note it can take between 2-4 weeks for requests to be reviewed.



## Further resources

The following resources may be of use and interest.

### ARC Specific documents

- Research Needs and Priorities: ARC has created a 'Research Needs and Priorities' document to highlight and communicate the topics that we require research evidence on. This document will evolve and be regularly updated as our research needs expand and shift. Access the document [here](#).
- Memorandum of Understanding: Please see the following MoU template that researchers will be asked to sign.

### Agroecology and food sovereignty

The following resources provide information on agroecology and food sovereignty. We ask that researchers familiarise themselves with these concepts to better understand the work that organisations and practitioners are engaged in.

- [Nyeleni declaration of food sovereignty](#)
- [Nyeleni declaration of agroecology](#)
- [La Via Campesina](#)

### Organisational information

[Community Supported Agriculture network](#)

[Ecological Land Cooperative](#)

[Landworkers' Alliance](#)

[Organic Growers Alliance](#)

[Pasture for Life](#)



*The Agroecology Research Collaboration (ARC) is an initiative developed by the Landworkers' Alliance (LWA), the Community Supported Agriculture Network UK (CSAN), the Ecological Land Cooperative (ELC), the Organic Growers Alliance (OGA) and Pasture for Life (PFL). We are organisations working within the UK food, farming, forestry and land-use sector with a large membership base of agroecological practitioners.*

