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Article:
Gittins, P. and McElwee, G. (2023) Constrained Rural Entrepreneurship: Upland Farmer Responses to the Socio-Political Challenges in England's Beef and Sheep Sector. Journal of Rural Studies, 104 (103141). ISSN: 0743-0167

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103141

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Constrained Rural Entrepreneurship: Upland Farmer Responses to the Socio-Political Challenges in England's Beef and Sheep Sector

Abstract

UK farmers are facing significant uncertainty due to recent post-Brexit policy changes. Upland farmers in England are particularly at risk, due to their high dependence on European subsidy support payments. Farm entrepreneurship strategies may be a viable solution for these farmers to achieve economic sustainability while continuing to make valuable social and environmental contributions via multifunctional enterprises. However, many socio-economic constraints often prevent farmers from implementing these strategies. This paper builds upon existing research on 'constrained entrepreneurship in UK agriculture' by examining the Constrained Institutional Contexts that upland farmers operate within. Using a qualitative approach, the paper explores and theorizes how upland farmers are constrained by exogeneous forces which control access to and dependence on resources. The findings highlight the importance of a supportive rural environment for farm entrepreneurship; however, they also reveal that the success of such strategies is often beyond the control of individual farmers and policy support is often necessary to alleviate these constraints.

Keywords: Constrained Rural Entrepreneurship, UK Farming, Farm Business Strategies, Rural Studies, Resource Dependence.

1.0 Introduction

The farming and food industries are valued at over £120 billion to the UK's economy (NFU, 2022), with farmers playing a crucial role in supporting local, regional, national and international economies. Upland farmers via multifunctional farming enterprises provide a range of public goods, including food production, job creation, biodiversity, carbon storage, and flood management (Parliament, 2010). Farmers produce both commodity and non-commodity outputs via a range of strategies that have economic, social and environmental dimensions (Cardillo et al., 2023). However, the sector faces increasing socio-economic and environmental challenges. Post-Brexit, strong support will be necessary for upland farmers to help achieve the UK government's Net-Zero objectives (Gov. UK, 2022). Financial sustainability and necessary skills are crucial for farmers to achieve these goals, but an ageing farmer profile and work-life balance hinder skill-set development. Through formalized institutional mechanisms, such as subsidies and grants, rural policymakers are financially incentivising farmers to deliver stronger social and environmental objectives. This policy change will undoubtedly generate great uncertainty in the UK's farm sector. A shifting institutional context will bring both [entrepreneurial] opportunities and new sets of constraints to the farm sector, which farm businesses must learn to strategically navigate.

The implications of post-Brexit[1] legislative changes are a cause for concern for many farmers. Subsidies and grants were previously paid to farmers in England via the Basic Payments Scheme (BPS), which will be removed by 2028 (Gov.UK, 2022). Under a Domestic Agricultural Policy (DAP), those farming in Less Favourable Areas (LFAs) are likely to be most affected by these policy changes- with subsidies in some instances comprising up to 90% of an upland farmer's annual income (Abboud, 2018). If handled improperly through the roll-out of the Environmental Land Management schemes[2] (ELMs), improper handling of a smooth agricultural transition plan could lead to farm business failure.[3] Supported and formalised farm entrepreneurship strategies could be one potential solution to declining farm incomes. However, industry constraints may prevent farmers from pursuing such entrepreneurial business strategies.

This paper builds on our earlier work on 'constrained entrepreneurship in UK agriculture' by developing the concept of the 'constrained farm entrepreneur' and discussing the factors and forces that prevent farmers from pursuing entrepreneurial farm business strategies (Gittins et

[1] Brexit- In 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum which resulted in a majority (52%) vote to leave the European Union. This vote initiated the process of the UK no longer being a member of the EU.

[2] Environmental Land Management Schemes- the new subsidies and grants replacing the Basic Payments Scheme for farmers in England. Instead of farmers being paid based on land ownership, farmers are now rewarded for delivering environmental services, under the mantra of 'Public Money for Public Goods. ELMs consist of three tiers (1) The Sustainable Farming Incentive. (2) Local Nature Recovery. (3) Landscape Recovery. Defra envisions 70% of farmers participating in the SFI by 2028.

3 Declining farm numbers across Europe- European phenomenon of decreasing numbers of small family farms, with over four million farming businesses closing between 2005 and 2015 (European Environment Agency, 2022).

al., 2022). We focus on upland farmers operating in resource-constrained environments and analyse the Constrained Institutional Contexts (CIC's) they operate within- an area of research that has seen limited scholarly attention in rural contexts. We build on Refai and McElwee's (2022) work by understanding the formal (i.e., subsidies, grants, bureaucratic procedures etc.) and informal (i.e., family, tradition, culture) institutional constraints facing farming businesses. We conceptualise how constrained entrepreneurs must navigate battles with their oppressors to attain resource access, manage dependence and exercise greater control within their CIC's. We develop a conceptual framework outlining dimensions that we deem to be valuable in creating a conducive environment supportive of farm entrepreneurship strategies (De Rosa et al., 2022), highlighting the importance of entrepreneurial mindsets, resource access and strategic thinking capabilities. To theorize the CIC, we utilise a novel theoretical approach, drawing on classical sociological theory, namely Max Weber's (1978) notions on domination and power in association with Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) (Hillman et al., 2009) to understand the present realities facing farmers. We argue that this theoretical framework leads to a better understanding of the under-researched phenomenon of 'constrained rural entrepreneurship' (Gittins et al., 2022). This approach helps overcome the 'theoretical deficit' often present in farm entrepreneurship and rural studies literature (Suess-Reyes and Fuetsch, 2016; Pato and Texieira, 2016).

Through our empirical and theoretical analysis, we build on earlier work contextualized to UK [upland] farming via an empirical exploration of farmer's lived experiences and present realities (O'Rourke et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2017; Maye et al., 2018; Franks et al., 2020; Gittins, 2022). Our study qualitatively builds on previous research that has examined resource constraints facing UK farming businesses (Franks, 2022), building on this work by highlighting how resource constraints can be managed via rural 'bridging agents.' Our findings also build on Morris's (2017) work that examined the tensions facing upland farmers in rural Wales, supporting the notion that farmers are facing increasing pressures to pursue entrepreneurial business strategies. Our research highlights how individual farm factors, such as personal farmer characteristics, business characteristics and business activities and processes, play a significant role in the nature of challenges encountered within CIC's. Our findings resonate with O'Rourke et al. (2012), stressing the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of farm business practices within hill and upland farming systems, our findings highlight the diverse nature of constraints upland farmers deal with from within their own CIC's. Such internal and external constraints are often overlooked by rural policymakers.

The central research question guiding this study is:

"What are the sources of constraints that prevent upland farmers from the attainment of their entrepreneurial farm business strategies?"

In this paper, we first introduce the literature on 'entrepreneurial farmers' and develop a conceptualization. Next, we outline the theoretical underpinnings of our work, discussing 'constrained rural entrepreneurship' and RDT (Hillman et al., 2009) in relation to Weberian (1978) themes of Power and Domination. We then outline our qualitative methodology, before presenting and discussing empirical data on the constraints facing farmers. We then outline measures to transition towards a more conducive environment supportive of rural entrepreneurship strategies. Finally, we summarise the wider theoretical, practical, and policy implications of our work.

2.0 Rural Entrepreneurship

Research in the field of rural entrepreneurship is gaining momentum (Bosworth et al., 2015). Scholars studying rural contexts often have personal connections to rural areas. Topics explored in this field include demographic and psychological factors, characteristics of rural enterprises, embeddedness, definitions of rurality, rural business growth, governance and institutional frameworks, and policy measures (Pato and Teixeira, 2016).

Scholars studying rural entrepreneurship have approached the topic in various ways. Some take a functionalist perspective, focusing on hard and physical boundaries such as population density, proximity to urban areas, and topographical makeup, resulting in much quantitative research to try to explain rural phenomena (Phillipson et al., 2019). Others examine the more subjective aspects of rurality, attempting to understand issues that are harder to explain, such as farming cultures, heritage, and traditions (Woods, 2011). Our approach is to explore the subjective lived experiences of farmers (*verstehen*), which we believe is not possible to explore in sufficient depth through a functionalist approach. Additionally, interpretative/constructionist research is limited in the field of farm entrepreneurship (McElwee, 2008b), with scholars calling for more qualitative research to investigate the entrepreneurship phenomenon (Packard, 2017).

Conceptualizing the Entrepreneurial Farmer

Broadly speaking, a range of theories, themes and concepts from the business and management studies literature *could* be used to conceptualize 'farmers as entrepreneurs' (McElwee, 2006). Indeed, Carter (1998) and McNally (2001) argue that the methods used to analyse business entrepreneurs in other sectors can be applied to rural businesses, such as farms. While we agree that many theories, themes and concepts relevant to [urban] business entrepreneurs *can* be applied to rural contexts, not all *should.* Their application should be approached with caution. Indeed, the concept of farm entrepreneurship is multifaceted and can encompass various behavioural approaches, such as opportunity identification and exploitation (Kirzner, 1979), and trait-based approaches, analysing entrepreneurial mindsets and personality traits (McGrath and McMillan, 2000).

But, despite the growing body of literature on entrepreneurial farmers (McElwee, 2006), it is important to note that not all farmers possess entrepreneurial traits or engage in entrepreneurial activities. Similar to the distinction between business owners and entrepreneurs in enterprise literature (Carland et al., 1984), we also distinguish entrepreneurial farmers from other [non-entrepreneurial] types (McElwee, 2008; Gittins et al., 2022).

This heterogeneity of farmer types leads to issues in conceptualizations. For example, while analysing traits and characteristics can be helpful in building a sound conceptualization; this approach has been criticised as many so-called entrepreneurial traits exist, with little indication of them leading to entrepreneurial behaviour (Kilby, 1971). Other scholars have conceptualized farm entrepreneurs via an application of the concept of Entrepreneurial Orientation: analysing risk-taking propensity, innovation, and proactive behaviour (Smith et al., 2021). But we argue that the behaviours of entrepreneurial farmers far exceed this singular concept, and a more fluid approach is needed that captures both behavioural and trait aspects.

Typology frameworks, such as McElwee's (2008) and Morris et al.'s (2017), have proven useful in conceptualizing entrepreneurial farmers as heterogeneous in nature- something often

overlooked by policymakers. Moreover, Gittins et al. (2022) combined these multiple units of analysis into one typology, pairing farmer types with corresponding farm business and strategy types. While these frameworks are theoretically grounded, they have empirical limitations due to their static nature. Ideal types simplify the complex social worlds of farmers, and therefore, such frameworks must be approached with caution (Swedberg, 2018). Nonetheless, they are useful in theorizing rural entrepreneurship.

In this study, we draw on McElwee and Smith's Farmer Segmentation Framework (FSF) (2012), to build our conceptualization of entrepreneurial upland farmers. Through using the FSF we have been able to think more broadly, practically and critically about the personal characteristics, business characteristics and business activities and processes associated with farming businesses.

Personal Characteristics

Personal characteristics such as age, gender, education, experience, and ownership status can provide valuable insights into the individual running a farming business. For instance, research has shown that entrepreneurial intentions tend to peak among individuals aged 25-34 (Lévesque and Minniti, 2011), a notable finding given that many farmers in the UK are over 65 years old. Gender is also an important factor, as women are increasingly playing a significant role in initiating entrepreneurial strategies in the male-dominated industry (Jervell, 2011; Ghouse et al., 2017; Kempster et al., 2023). Farmers can have varying levels of experience and educational backgrounds and may enter farming through farm succession or as 'new entrants' to the industry (Lobley, 2010). Finally, ownership status is an important consideration, as farmers who own their land are subject to different institutional forces than those who do not (e.g., landlord relationships, short farm business tenancies) (Lobley, 2010).

Business Characteristics

Regarding business characteristics, farm size, topography, geographical location, commodities produced, and diversification all play important roles. Farm size is significant, as larger farms are typically able to reach economies of scale and, under the CAP, have been more profitable (Gittins, 2022). Furthermore, the sector is an important factor, as farmers are not homogenous and are influenced by different contexts depending on their sub-sector. This research focuses specifically on upland farming in LFA's. Diversified activities are also crucial to consider, as it is necessary to understand whether farmers are 'pushed' or 'pulled' towards diversification (McElwee, 2008). Finally, geography and topography are important factors, as proximity and location can determine access to resources.

Business Activities and Processes

Business activities and processes vary depending on farmers' strategies and the networks they engage with. Entrepreneurial farmers tend to have more professional networks and seek business advice, while traditionalist farmers rely on personal family and friend networks (McElwee and Bosworth, 2010). Networks provide access to social capital, which can help farmers identify new opportunities and create beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Arnott et al., 2021). Technology adoption and innovation, such as automation and precision agriculture, can help farmers reduce costs and improve margins (Bowen and Morris, 2019; Gittins et al., 2020). Strong strategic thinking skills can also help farmers identify and manage risks and opportunities to future-proof their business.

Strategies for Farm Development

Although the literature on rural entrepreneurship tends to focus on farm diversification as a primary strategy for entrepreneurial farmers, we argue that farm diversification is not the only strategic choice. Indeed, farmers can be entrepreneurial without pursuing farm diversification and can pursue other strategies, as outlined by Smith et al. (2017):

1. Growth by expansion of production
2. Expansion of markets
3. Growth by land acquisition
4. Enlarge capacity by vertical integration
5. Co-operation with other entrepreneurs
6. Enlarge capacity and add value integration
7. Do nothing
8. Give up the enterprise

Farm diversification requires diverse skillsets, including creativity, IT, finance, and marketing (Lokier et al. 2021). This may require farmers to shift their identities away from conventional farming roles and take on roles such as businessmen, accountants, and environmentalists. Such shifts can be challenging for farmers who did not intend to supplement farming with non-farming income. Additionally, conceptualizing farmers as entrepreneurs can be problematic due to the various factors that shape entrepreneurial activities and ambitions (see table one below).

Type of Farmer	Personal Characteristics (FSF)	Business Characteristics (FSF)	Business Activities and Processes (FSF)
Traditionalist Farmer Type	Often older aged, farm owner, limited education, more likely to be male.	Often larger landowner, limited in terms of diversification (push), farm location is often selected through tradition, farm succession- primogeniture.	Limited use of technology, no planned strategies/reactive strategies, reliance on family and friends in support networks, low strategic thinking capabilities.
Entrepreneurial Farmer Type	Often younger, male or female, education and outside experience, tenant farmer.	Could be large or small, innovation and diversification strategies central (pull), location of farm selected on rationale logic.	Technology facilitates farm entrepreneurship strategies, high levels of strategic thinking capabilities, variety of support networks used outside of initial family and friends, clear business strategies.

Table 1 Our Conceptualization of the Entrepreneurial Upland Farmer Types via the Farmer Segmentation Framework. Adapted from Gittins et al. (2022) Typology.

Our central research question also implies that farmers *have* strategies, yet we acknowledge that from our empirical data gathered through this project, and our own collective experiences in farming, many farmers do not have formal business strategies (Gittins et al., 2022). Now that we have developed our own conceptualization of [entrepreneurial] farmers from conducting a literature review across the rural entrepreneurship and rural studies literature, we outline our theoretical underpinning.

3.0 Constrained Entrepreneurship: Power, Domination and Resource Dependence

This research builds on the work of Gittins et al. (2022) on constrained rural entrepreneurship in UK agriculture, which suggests that farmers face significant resource constraints that hinder their entrepreneurial pursuits. The study highlights how formal institutions, such as subsidy schemes, play a crucial role in shaping the strategies and behaviour of rural actors. Recent policy changes in the UK, such as the shift towards public goods payments under ELMs, may constrain some farmers' business activities while favouring others, for example, those who already practice sustainable farming methods like 'regenerative agriculture' or 'organic farming'.

We draw on the Weberian (1978) concepts of Power (*Macht*) and Domination (*Herrschaft*) to understand (*Verstehen*) the concept of 'constrained rural entrepreneurship.' We conceptualize this environment as a complex system of actor and network relationships affected by changes in the shifting institutional environment, which can create CIC for individuals and power-struggle relationships between certain actors. These relationships often empower certain actors, granting them control over valuable resources, while oppressing others.

Weber (1978:53) defines power as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.' Power is interesting when thought of in relation to constrained rural entrepreneurship, suggesting that there are specific power structures with actors that are the sources of such constraints (i.e., Oppressors) and actors that are recipients of oppression (i.e., Oppressed). We recognise that farmers do not operate in isolation; they are part of a larger and interconnected system engaging with various actors, allowing some to exercise more power and control, creating groups of oppressors and the oppressed through legitimate systems of authority (Weber, 1978). Examining the sources of such constraints can help us to gain a better understanding of how to effectively manage them and move from a constrained environment to a conducive one.

Weber notes that 'every genuine form of domination implies a minimum level of voluntary compliance, that is, an interest in obedience' (Swedberg and Agevall, 2016). Those in positions of power have been given a legitimate source of authority, achieved in one of three ways (table 2).

Type of authority	Meaning
Traditional	'Obey me because this is what our people have always done'
Charismatic	'Obey me because I can transform your life'
Legal-rational	'Obey me because I am lawfully appointed as your superior'

Table 2 Legitimate Types of Power, Adapted from Parkin (1982)

Weber (1978) defines three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal or rational authority. Traditional authority is based on long-standing traditions, such as patriarchalism and gerontocracy. Charismatic authority is gained through exceptional abilities, such as with 'hero' entrepreneurs and leaders. Legal or rational authority is built on rules, and those elevated to authority under such rules have the right to issue commands. This analysis is important in the context of rural entrepreneurship as it shows how individuals can achieve and sustain legitimate control and influence entrepreneurial strategies for farm businesses. The "traditional" forms of

authority usually found within family farm businesses can constrain entrepreneurial approaches (Swedberg and Agevall, 2016).

Adopting a Resource Based View perspective (Barney, 2001), resources are key for businesses to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. However, many resources are controlled externally by other individuals and organisations (Pfeffer, 1987). This need for resources and dependence on other organisations can create power struggles between certain [rural] actors-creating a CIC. RDT highlights the interdependence between organisations and their external environment. The theory suggests that organisations must develop strategies to acquire, control, and protect resources from external sources in order to survive and maintain their competitive advantage (Hillman et al., 2009). RDT also provides insights into how organisations can leverage strategic alliances and networks to access resources and sustain their competitive advantage.

While resource-based strategies, such as RDT and RBV, originate in the fields of strategic management and arguably are more suited to understanding larger multi-national organisations, we argue that RDT can aid our understanding of the constrained rural context and the strategic thinking capabilities of [constrained] farm entrepreneurs. RBV has been applied as a theoretical framing across several rural studies research (Suess-Reyes et al., 2016), but to the best of our knowledge, there are few studies drawing on RDT within the context of constrained rural entrepreneurship. This presents a research gap around exploring how the concept of RDT can be applied to learn more about constrained rural entrepreneurship.

4.0 Methodology- Qualitative, insider

The data collected from this study originates from a wider project that sought to investigate the lived experiences facing upland farmers in England (Gittins, 2022). A qualitative methodology was used, drawing on semi-structured interviews, unstructured *ad-hoc* conversations, photographs and a research diary. Data collection began in 2019 and finished in mid-2021.

In total, twenty formal semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with upland farmers across four regions: Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria and Exmoor. We draw on five selected cases and supporting interview quotes from the rest of the sample to address our research question. To identify relevant participants, we employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Parker et al., 2019), leveraging our personal networks within the industry and reaching out to formal hill/upland farming networks. We drew on our 'industry insider' positions to aid the research process (Chavez, 2008) for example one researcher lives and works on an upland farm, in addition to their academic job and another works on a farm and is a dry-stone waller. Many of our interactions with farmers occurred through serendipitous events related to our insider positionality.

This insider positionality enabled us to overcome data access issues caused by COVID-19 (Jowett, 2020). Phone interviews were a suitable option, as a significant number of upland farmers do not have access to the internet or the necessary computer skills, making online interviews unrealistic. Additionally, conducting phone interviews was more time-efficient for farmers as it was hay-making season. We also believed it was an ethical choice, as we aimed to reduce face-to-face interactions during the pandemic (Jowett, 2022).

A loose interview schedule was created to understand farmers and their businesses (informed by the aspects of the FSF). This approach enabled us to develop a 'complete picture' of each farm[er] case. The questions included:

Questions	Purpose
'Tell me about yourself?'	To learn about the **personal characteristics** of the farmer
'Tell me about your farm?'	To learn about the **farm business characteristics**
'How's business going?'	To understand about the constraints facing them and their business and the **business activities and process** undertaken to respond to such constraints
'What is your farm business strategy?	To understand about any planned strategies being pursued
'What is an entrepreneurial farmer to you?	To understand how entrepreneurial the farmers are

Table 3 Interview Questions

We wanted the interview process to be as fluid as possible in line with a qualitative approach. Our research approach combined ethnographical and case study research principles (Walsh; 1998; Bassey, 1999). Themes were then created through drawing on Clarke and Braun's six stage approach to thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015), followed by the creation of short case studies that capture the essence of these themes. In the following section, we present these themes through a narrative analysis (Esin, 2011), presenting five stories highlighting the constraints facing farmers and the power-relationship dynamics between farmers and other actors in pursuit of resources.

5.0 Findings and Discussions

The following short cases outline the power struggles that occur between farmers and more powerful actors over resource control and access. Each case represents a key theme from Weber. The main themes identified through the data collection were constraints centred around: (1) working with family (2) removal of farm subsidy payments (3) tenancy issues (4) barriers to growth (5) regional factors. These were the main sources of constraints to entrepreneurial business strategies. Following these case introductions, we engage in broader theoretical debates and provide a conceptual model that outlines how resource access and control can constrain farm entrepreneurship strategies.

Case 1: Working with family and navigating farm succession

"It's annoying. Any good ideas I have, my dad says no. What's the point?" (Chris)

"It's taken me all my life to build this farm and he thinks he can just get it handed to him like that. I had to work for my mother and grandmother all my life. I didn't get the farm until I was 55 and he's not even twenty. He should listen more." (John)

John, a seventy-year-old third generation farmer, has dedicated his entire life to the family business. Despite his love for farming, he is starting to feel the physical demands of the work and is looking to scale back his involvement. However, his plans are complicated by the fact that only one of his children, Chris, has expressed an interest in taking over the farm.

Chris, a nineteen-year-old with a passion for agriculture, left school early to fully commit himself to the family business. But despite his dedication, he has struggled to make his voice heard. Chris is eager to bring new, innovative ideas to the farm, such as diversifying operations and exploring entrepreneurial opportunities. One such opportunity is a wood diversification project, he sources logs [for free], splits them with his log splitter and stores them for drying in a storage container on the farm (Photo 1).

Chris is determined to make a success of his entrepreneurial ventures, including the wood diversification project, but he must navigate the constraints placed on him by his father. He eventually plans to sell the wood to local farmers and rural properties with log burning stoves, but John remains resistant to change and sceptical of anything that strays from traditional farming methods. Still two years later, John has not given him permission to sell his logs.

(Chris's firewood business, Photo Author Generated)

Case 1 Working with family

Prior literature highlights the importance of family as a facilitator to entrepreneurial business strategies (Jervell, 2011), but case 1 illustrates how farm succession and working with family can also be a constraint to entrepreneurial activities. Across our interviews, frustrations were evident between farm owners and their children. Farm children often wanted to pursue more innovative strategies with more traditionalist farm owners wanting to maintain the identity of the farm business that they have developed. This finding supports Lokier's et al. (2021) work, who found that some farmers don't want to move their identity away from commercial activities (i.e., livestock/sales). Drawing on Weberian theory, our case indicates the powerful role of seniority and status (Weber, 1978) and how it can constrain entrepreneurial ideas. The case is illustrative of the battle for legitimation and authority facing many younger farmers. Indeed, it can take years for authority holders to allow farm children to gain control. John did not get full autonomy until in his mid-fifties- by which time his aptitude for pursuing entrepreneurial ideas likely had declined with age (Lévesque and Minniti, 2011).

Throughout the interviews, farm succession was found to be a key constraint experienced by farm children, with the idea of working with family and having little authority playing a central role in some members of the farm family seeking employment outside of agriculture. A lack of strategic planning and communication between current owners and heirs created tensions. One farmer interviewed commented on these issues:

> "I suppose it's the lack of talk between father and son, as to what the future direction of the business will be. I have a brother who is not in farming but obviously he must be considered. There's nothing happening at the discussion side. There's a lot of big questions around the overall goal of where the farm is going. It's somewhat up in the air really… I'm trying to persuade my dad to set out a 5 year or a 10-year plan and possibly even his retirement plan, but he's very reluctant to retire and very very reluctant to slow down… We just need to know what he wants. If he told me this is where'd be in the beginning, I would have chosen a different career.'
>
> (Alex, 48-year-old farmer from Exmoor)

Of course, some [entrepreneurial] farmers viewed farm succession as a critical stage of business development (Lobley, 2010), involving actors from outside personal networks (McElwee and Bosworth, 2010), such as farm advisors and solicitors to devise a clear plan as to what happens to the farm's assets in the future, with clear communication throughout. These farmers possessed high levels of strategic thinking capabilities (Liedtka, 1998). But generally, amongst most farmer interviews succession planning was a controversial topic and source of constraint to entrepreneurial endeavours.

Case 1 highlights how traditional authority can constrain farm entrepreneurship activities. Indeed, the notions of succession and seniority can be a source of unequal distribution of power and resources.

Case 2: Removal of Farming Subsidies

"I'm not worried about things anymore at my age. All this that's happening with the subsidies, it's a young person problem." (Gordon)

Gordon is a farmer in Lancashire who has spent his entire life working the land. Now in his seventies, he runs a 2000-hectare upland farm that operates on a low input system. Gordon is mortgage-free and has minimal liabilities, thanks in part to the income he has earned from several properties he owns in the nearby town. These properties have provided him with a steady stream of income for the past thirty years, thanks to long-term tenants.

Gordon's farm is a self-sustaining operation. His sheep graze on the moorland, and his suckler beef cattle are fed hay and silage that he bales himself in the summer months. He has minimal input costs, with the exception of a few tonnes of beef nuts and refilling the diesel tank twice a year. Gordon is a hands-on farmer who is able to fix most machinery breakdowns and handle his own plumbing with the help of a natural spring. He heats his home with a log burner, using his own wood, and has access to natural springs on his farm-giving him and his livestock free water.

Basic payments and the sale of his livestock and property income have largely funded Gordon's "lifestyle" as a farmer. As subsidy support for English farmers is phased out, Gordon is not particularly worried. He sees it as a "young person's problem", confident in his ability to continue running his farm with minimal input and financial assistance.

Gordon is glad that he will not have to deal with the changing policies. He finds the bureaucratic nature of applying for subsidies and grants troublesome. He does not envy the younger generation in this situation.

Case 2: Phasing out of BPS

The institutional conditions are shifting, farmers are no longer being incentivised based on land ownership. Some farmers like Gordon have been protected and operated from within a 'velvet cage' protected by the formal institutional conditions (Gittins et al., 2022). The above case highlights the importance of having access to financial resources, such as farming subsidies, for farmers to be able to run their operations. While subsidy loss isn't a concern for him, it is a critical financial resource for others:

> "I am quite happy to put my hand on my heart and say the single farm payment has allowed me to stay profitable for these last 15 years. Now, if that was gone overnight, I'm not sure how long I could keep afloat."
>
> (Nick, a Sixty-year older farmer from Lancashire)

Indeed, BPS reductions/removal are concerning many farmers, it would be fair to say that many farmers have become economically reliant on them:

> "I think I could survive a year or two, but it's so difficult to know because I sell a lot of heifers for breeding, would that man be there to buy them? I sell store cattle; would that finisher still be there to buy them? You've got feed businesses, if there's less livestock farms then there will be no one buying the feed, then these businesses will go bust. Then there would be very high chances of me having to give up. The whole thing would change dramatically. Everything would be turned on its head."
>
> (Roger, a fifty-year-old upland farmer from Cumbria).

This extract from Roger resonates with RDT (Hillman et al., 2009), suggesting that farmers are incredibly reliant upon local and further afield resources to sustain their farm activities. Whilst some farmers might be sustainable without BPS (like Gordon or Roger), the success[4] of farming businesses is largely dependent on a range of supply chain actors. Farmers do not operate in isolation, they need access to people, for example store producers, finishing farms, animal feed stores, machinery garages *inter alia*. The removal of subsidies may therefore have consequences beyond its economic impact on farmers alone.

Many tenant farmers interviewed shared their concerns that subsidy support mechanisms have only favoured those large-scale landowners. Some were critical of the system and embraced change, suggesting subsidies only support failing businesses. One farmer commented:

> 'I don't see any of the subsidies anyway, they all go straight to the landlord. Subsidy loss won't be a big thing for me. It might even up the playing field and allow me to one day buy land. All the subsidies have done is inflate land prices and kept the rich, rich.'
>
> (Andrew, 50-year-old farmer from Lancashire)

[4] Farm success- This is a relative term and can be measured in various ways.

In line with the work of Maye et al. (2009), our findings indicate that tenant farmers are particular constrained by the subsidy system. Indeed, subsidies play a crucial role in farm profitability for upland farmers, and farmers will likely have to turn to other revenue streams to sustain business performance. However, some farmers already have multiple income streams, and their farming businesses are only surviving due to off farm diversification and pluriactivity strategies (Bateman and Ray, 1994). The quote below emphasises this point:

> "The reality of it is, and here I'll be completely honest with you, my wife is a General Practitioner, and she can earn more doing two days a week than I can ever dream of [laughs] She is keeping us afloat."
>
> (Darren, 42-year-old farmer from Exmoor)

Indeed, some farmers were preparing themselves mentally for farming without the support payments, thinking about other ways to reduce operating costs or add value- future proofing their farm businesses. These farmers were typically more entrepreneurial in nature and possessed high levels of STC's (Liedtka, 1998).

In order to access and utilise these grants effectively, farmers must have the necessary knowledge and skills in areas such as farm business, land, livestock, inputs and environmental impacts. Furthermore, they must have the ability to navigate and comply with regulations, and the capacity to fill out forms and other administrative duties. Without these skills, farmers risk not being able to access the grants, making poor choices that can have a negative effect on their farm business, or even incurring fines for non-compliance (Gittins, 2021). In such cases, farmers may need to enlist the services of other actors, such as land agents, to bridge the skills gap. One farmer commented on these issues:

> "All the form filling is too damn difficult. I don't even bother with these newer schemes because I don't understand it. The money that is bleeding out of this industry is astronomical. People charging an arm and a leg just to send a bloody letter."
>
> (Margaret, a 73-year-old farmer from Cumbria).

Indeed, subsidy loss is a constraint and complex problem facing many farmers and is interpreted differently depending on various factors such as age and ownership status. Farmers will have to familiarise themselves with new subsidies and grants, and where skillsets and capabilities are absent, will likely have to seek expertise from other actors- increasing costs.

Case 2 highlights the powerful role of shifting institutions and the differential impacts it has to certain actors in society. Weber believed that the development of new formal institutions was a key factor in shaping social change and enforcing increasing rationalisation.

Case 3: Tenancy Issues

> "The landlord said no, 'we don't want extra walkers coming through the fields.' I was absolutely livid. I thought there was a real opportunity here to have a bit of a retail outlet here in the farmyard. My wife could have worked part-time, she was thinking of selling sandwiches and cakes and so on. And it just fit in with everything we did. We have a good story to tell, I like engaging with the public, we have footpaths criss- crossing the farm in every direction and we are

two miles from the local college. We thought it was a real opportunity, but the landlord said, 'no. we're not having it.' I pleaded almost on my knees begging to have this opportunity. I'm sorry this is not a very positive story." (Arthur)

Arthur is a tenant farmer in Lancashire, running a sheep-only enterprise in the beautiful Forest of Bowland National Park. His farm is easily accessible, with a range of public footpaths for walkers and good roads for vehicle access. It is located just two miles from the local college.

One day, Arthur had a brilliant idea to turn an old dairy on his farm into a diversification outlet. The building, which is one of only four in Lancashire with 19th century cruck beams, would be a perfect location for a café, where Arthur's wife could work as well. Excited by this opportunity, Arthur approached a historical architect to draft up a business plan.

But when Arthur presented the plan to his landlord, he was met with a disappointing response. The landlord refused, citing a desire to keep walkers away from the farm. Arthur was frustrated and felt powerless against the control that landlords can wield over tenants. He turned to his local farming union for help, hoping they could do something to address the issue. His efforts were ignored.

Despite his efforts, Arthur's dream of opening a café in the unique dairy building has yet to be realized. The structure, with its remarkable cruck beams, remains hidden from the public eye.

(Photo 2- Cruck Framed Barn: Source https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/archerit1-302008/)

Case 3 Tenancy Issues

Case 3 demonstrates how powerful actors can constrain entrepreneurial farm business strategies, despite farmers possessing all the necessary characteristics for entrepreneurship (Pyysiäinen et al., 2006). The landlord's competing views on how the farm should be run prevented Arthur from pursuing his own entrepreneurial venture. This highlights the problematic issues surrounding farm business tenancies and the enforcement of will over others (Weber, 1978), which continue to limit the potential for entrepreneurial success.

Case 3 illustrates an example of how power can be concentrated in the hands of a few individuals or organisations, leading to domination and the exclusion of other voices and perspectives. Arthur's frustration and sense of powerlessness in the face of the landlord's decision illustrates the constraints and limitations imposed by relationships of domination and the unequal distribution of power in society.

Case 4: Barriers to Growth

"I had enough of them. It could have been a big opportunity, but it was a huge risk at my end. It could end up bankrupting me if it goes wrong."(Daniel)

After spending thirty years in academia as an immunobiologist, Daniel was drawn to the world of farming. He took on a small farm business tenancy and specialized in the production of mutton, supplying independent carcasses to restaurants. His unique approach paid off – rather than selling store lambs or fat lambs for £80 per head, he was able to sell directly for a much higher price of £300 per head. In an industry with slim margins, this additional income made a significant impact on Daniel's bottom line.

However, despite his success, Daniel faced challenges as he tried to grow his business. Land was scarce in the local area, and more established farmers often took precedence. Despite his expertise and determination, Daniel struggled to obtain the resources he needed to expand his operation. He was often overlooked in favour of more established farmers with deeper connections in the local farming community. As a result, Daniel was forced to constantly fight for his place in an industry where access to resources was tightly controlled by a select few.

Additionally, he struggled to scale his mutton enterprise, even when approached by major buyers like Waitrose. The grocery giant expressed interest in a yearly supply of mutton carcasses, but when Daniel asked for a commitment in return, they refused. Without the ability to secure independent buyers, Daniel's stock was worth only cull ewe prices.

Despite these obstacles, Daniel remained determined. He even started offering sheep handling courses for new farmers, sharing his own experiences and knowledge with others just starting out in the industry. Despite the challenges he faced, Daniel remained determined to succeed in the competitive world of farming.

Case 4: Barriers to growth

Case 4 illustrates how farmers are initiating diversification strategies (direct selling) in response to declining farm income. As opposed to being price-takers, through direct selling farmers can become price givers and have better control over the returns. Diversification can be used as a strategy to respond to rural policy matters (De Rosa et al., 2019). The size of his farm means he receives little in BPS support. Moreover, his income is supplemented with his income from outside of farming. Indeed, pluriactivity has been and still is a common approach amongst farmers (Bateman and Ray, 1994), particularly new entrants and smaller-sized farms.

Daniel is constrained in terms of growth, while he *can* gain more of a financial return through direct selling, this depends on his ability to source buyers for the mutton in the hospitality industry (an industry that was closed during the lockdown crisis). Finding buyers can be tricky, as mutton is often perceived as an undesirable cut of meat- a perception that Daniel is trying to challenge through his business model. Establishing contractual relationships with buyers can help mitigate these challenges, however, as evidenced through Daniel's interactions with a large supermarket have their challenges.

Moreover, Daniel recognises the importance of growing his business through land acquisition (McElwee and Smith, 2012), but when nearby land is a scarce resource, and he is often overlooked in the local farming community. Priority is given to other [traditional] farmers who have greater authority in the community. While being an entrepreneurial farmer, he is still viewed as an outsider. In both instances, Daniel is dominated and constrained by more powerful actors and lacks access to social capital that can aid him in gaining access to essential resources to scale his business.

Regarding case 4, Weber's theory of power and domination focuses on the idea that power is a social relationship between individuals or groups. In the case of Daniel, we can see this theory in practice. Daniel faces challenges in obtaining the resources he needs to grow his business due to the control held by more established farmers with deeper connections in the local farming community. This control over access to resources gives these established farmers a certain level of power over Daniel. Additionally, the refusal of the grocery giant to provide a commitment highlights the unequal distribution of power in the industry, with major buyers holding a significant amount of power over small farmers, like Daniel.

Case 5 Regional Factors

"It's all about location, location, location…" (Mike)

"It's a bit hard to be entrepreneurial when you live halfway up a bloody mountain and it's ten miles away from your nearest shop or pub." (Simon)

Mike is a hardworking farmer in Lancashire, running a large operation on over 1000 hectares of land. He has built a network of resources and connections that support his farm's success, including a mutually beneficial arrangement with a nearby poultry farm. Each year, Mike uses his machinery to clean the poultry farm in exchange for valuable manure to fertilize his fields. He also has access to local resources like the Clitheroe livestock market and a nearby abattoir, where he takes some of his cattle for slaughter and sells the cuts directly to the public through his own meat box schemes. Mike selected the location of this farm due to its level of access to nearby resources.

In contrast, Simon faces a very different set of challenges on his 500-hectare farm in the Scottish borders. Isolated from any major population centres, Simon's nearest village is ten miles away and consists of little more than a pub, a post office, and a village shop. For necessities like groceries, Simon must travel further, travelling over fifty miles to reach a livestock market. Despite these difficulties, Simon remains dedicated to his farm and works hard to overcome the challenges of his remote location. Simon continues to farm the same land his family has farmed.

Case 5 Regional Factors

In Case 5, the importance of location and proximity to rural services is highlighted, which can be outside the control of farmers. Serendipity also plays a key role in inheriting a farming business in good condition (De Rosa et al., 2019), with resource-rich land and minimal liabilities. Inheriting a farm in an AONB or a location suitable for tourism-related activities can be a strategic advantage. Living closer to towns and cities with essential rural resources and good relationships with neighbouring farms can also provide opportunities for entrepreneurial farmers to capitalise on. Developing social capital through bonding with local farmers is essential (Arnott et al., 2021).

Other farmers might enter farming through whatever land is available at a given time, without the advantages of inherited resources or proximity to essential rural services. They might also face constraints in terms of their relationships with other local farmers, who might not be receptive to notions of share farming or an 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' based on mutual collaborative farming practices. Additionally, geography and topography can pose significant challenges, such as being located far from essential resources or markets. For example, the absence of nearby abattoirs can limit the options available to farmers looking to establish farm shop meat boxes, as noted by McElwee and Smith (2012). Emotional attachment to a particular place can also play a key role in shaping entrepreneurial decisions, with some farmers choosing to farm in areas simply because it's where they grew up, prioritising sentimental ties over rational decision-making. These various factors demonstrate the complex interplay between individual agency and CIC's in shaping the entrepreneurial experiences of upland farmers.

Case 5 illustrates Weber's concept of power and domination as a social relationship shaped by location and access to resources. Both farmers are influenced by regional constraints, with Mike's success due to his proximity to resources and Simon's difficulties rooted in his isolation. This highlights the importance of location and access to resources in shaping power dynamics in agriculture.

5.1 Conducive environments supportive of Rural Entrepreneurship strategies

A key theme throughout this work has been the constraints to farm entrepreneurship strategies. The case studies highlight a complex entanglement of both micro and macro-level constraints. The cases highlight stories of oppressed actors in pursuit of business improvement.

For farmers to economically prosper, the environment should be conducive to entrepreneurial strategies, not constraining. However, the wider environment, and its development, remain outside the control of individual farmers. Farmers do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of a complicated system of actors and network relationships and require regular interactions with certain resources in the wider regional economy to run their businesses.

Figure 1 below conceptualises how rural actors (the oppressed) often must interact and engage with more powerful actors (their oppressors) in order to acquire and access resources to support the strategic development of the farm business.

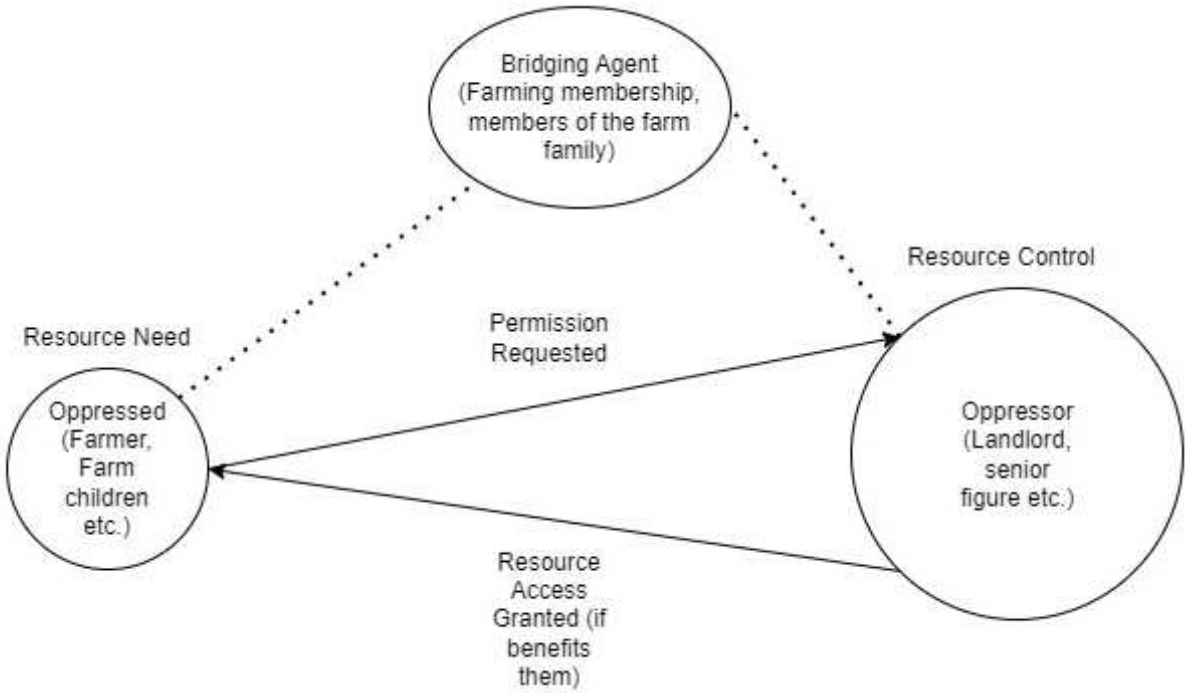

Figure 1 Resource Dependence and Farm Entrepreneurship

Resource access is often granted only if it is mutually beneficial and does not challenge or weaken the more powerful actor's position. To help gain access to said resources, actors can reach out to what we call 'bridging agents', other actors who can influence the power of the oppressor (members of the farm family, union members, professional services, land agents etc.).

The five cases presented show power struggles over resource access and dependence, resulting in constrained entrepreneurship. These include senior figures in farming preventing diversification (case 1), changing subsidies favouring pro-environmental agriculture (case 2), landlords limiting tenant farmers' entrepreneurial activities (case 3), land acquisition and growth struggles (case 4), and limited access to rural services (case 5), summarized in Table 3.

Case	Oppressor	Oppressed	[Resource] Constraint	Bridging agent
Succession	Father	Son	Permission to pursue diversified activities	Older farm children with more seniority
Subsidies	Rural Payments Agency	Farmers reliant on subsidies	[Accessing] finances	Land agents' knowledge in new subsidies and grants
Tenancy	Landlord	Tenants	Permission to use farm buildings for diversification project	NFU, National Tenants Association.
Growth	Supermarket	Farmers	Land security, secure contracts.	Farmers in the local community.
Regional factors	Local, regional, national policymakers	Farmers	Access to rural resources (auction markets, abattoirs, feed suppliers etc.)	Academics, agricultural trade bodies, local councils.

Table 3 Summary of Cases

The cases presented here demonstrate the experiences of various oppressed actors attempt to gain control of vital resources to facilitate business growth, such as the acquisition of land and access to finances. Despite the challenges, each of these farmers is determined to make a success of their business from within their CIC. It is interesting to note that while each case highlights individual experiences of resource constraints, farmers in reality often face multiple constraints simultaneously, such as BPS reductions, difficulties with entering new schemes, and the control of land in the local community by other farmers- all at the same time. Our cases provide a snapshot of five examples, but in the practical realities of upland farmers, there are many others.

A conducive environment (De Rosa et al., 2022) is one that supports farmers in the development of their farm business strategies. Building on our model, we argue three things are necessary for a conducive environment: entrepreneurial mindset, resource access and strategic thinking capabilities. A lack of one of these can lead to a CIC.

Farmers must be willing to create business change, recognising that many business problems can be overcome. Without this willingness, farmers are constrained by their mindset. Entrepreneurial farmers are open to engagement (McElwee and Annibal, 2009), recognising the value of developing professional networks to overcome resource constraints (McElwee and Bosworth, 2010). Entrepreneurial farmers remain 'alert' (Kirzner, 1979) to new market opportunities, placing strong values on learning and education as a means to generate business improvement and achieve their business strategies.

Farmers need access to essential rural resources for value to be added to the farm business enterprises. For which a vibrant rural economy is crucial. Farmers experiencing a lack of access means many are unable to benefit from the advantages of a strong regional and local context. Such resources can include land (needed for pursuing growth through land acquisition strategies), livestock markets (both physical and online) that are supportive of livestock expansion strategies (McElwee and Smith, 2012), public and environmental goods (fitting with environmental strategies), access to the local rural labour force (Gittins et al., 2022) to support social entrepreneurship strategies, and abattoirs (to facilitate direct selling strategies). We argue that bridging agents have an important role to play, helping to address power struggles and limit farmer dependence on external resources. Indeed, by facilitating access, bridging agents can enable farmers to take full advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities and add value to their farm businesses.

Finally, we argue farmers must be able to utilise these resources in such a manner that they can add value. They must also be aware of family goals alongside the business objectives (Jervell, 2011). Indeed, resources might be accessible, but it is up to farmers to develop entrepreneurial tendencies and strategic thinking capabilities to enable them to discover and utilise resources. Resources need to be combined with the skillsets of the farmers for strategic capabilities to be leveraged (Liedtka, 1998).

Type of Environment	Mind-set and behaviour of Farm Entrepreneur	Resource Access & Control	Strategic Thinking Capabilities
Conducive Environment	Open to change Entrepreneurially alert Innovative thinking Seeking business improvement Eager to learn Social capital	Physical resources (land access, buildings, soil quality, Financial Support networks Family	Recognise the strategic importance of resources in competitive positioning. Resources can be used to add value to farming enterprise.

Table 5 Types of Environments Influencing Farm Entrepreneurship

In practice, many rural environments do not support entrepreneurship, despite the existence of resources. Some farmers lack an entrepreneurial mindset and fail to recognise opportunities (McElwee, 2006; Kirzner, 1979). Others are capable of leveraging resources but opt for lifestyle businesses (Pinto-Correia et al., 2015). Furthermore, some farmers face constraints, such as restricted access to resources by more powerful actors, hindering their entrepreneurial efforts. In such cases, bridging agents and policymakers can play a role in creating a more conducive environment for farm entrepreneurship.

6.0 Conclusion

In this paper we empirically and theoretically build on the under-researched area of ‘constrained entrepreneurship in UK agriculture’- specifically in an upland farming context (O’Rourke et al., 2012; Morris et al., 2017; Franks et al., 2020; Gittins, 2022). This empirical dimension gives a further sense of the ‘present realities’ of upland farmers in England (Maye et al., 2018).

Theoretically, we have engaged with what Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) term 'Comprehending theory'. We provide an interpretative and qualitative approach to understanding the phenomenon of constrained rural entrepreneurship through the exploration of our farmer case studies. We have identified and explored (via *Verstehen*) the 'hidden' and deeper meanings present within our cases, exploring underlying forces behind people's [social] actions. Throughout we have provided thick descriptions and narratives to illustrate how access to and dependence on resources can constrain farm entrepreneurial activities. We build on existing conceptualizations of CIC and conducive environments (Refai and McElwee, 2022; De Rosa et al., 2022, Gittins et al., 2022). We add three dimensions that we believe are important in supporting rural entrepreneurship strategies: Entrepreneurial thinking, resource access with limited dependence and enhancing farmer strategic thinking capabilities. Indeed, future research could build on our model- contextualizing our dimensions in association with other context types (institutional, spatial, temporal and societal) (Refai and McElwee, 2022).

Ultimately, our theoretical and empirical analysis demonstrate a greater need for policies that are supportive of farm entrepreneurship strategies. Policymakers should focus on creating a vibrant rural economy with policies that increase the availability of resources and facilitate greater collaboration. The UK government needs to place a stronger emphasis on levelling up rural economies, improving rural infrastructure, and developing farmers' entrepreneurial skillsets and strategic capabilities. This is crucial considering many farmers will likely be pursuing more entrepreneurial business strategies in the post-Brexit transition away from subsidy support. Perhaps some lessons can be learned from Europe, specifically the EU's Rural Development Policies. This includes increasing support for rural SME development, helping farmers learn and develop new entrepreneurial and competitive skillsets, and fostering strategic skills in scanning the external environment and assessing potential threats to the farm business. Many pertinent policy issues exist in this domain. It is crucial to aid new entrants into the sector and create a conducive environment for farm development, rather than a constrained one. While there is some funding available to support farmers under the Rural England Prosperity Fund, a key concern is that it primarily provides capital funds. Farmers require more than just financial support—skills development, training, and access to networks are equally essential. Furthermore, this funding is provided to Local Authorities, effectively creating a new power struggle and, quite likely, leading to more constrained rural entrepreneurs attempting to gain access to this scarce and critical financial resource

Practical considerations are also prominent. We argue that farmers are an overlooked and oppressed social group. Industry stakeholders and, indeed, academic institutions can play a role in helping upland farmers 'level up' their skill sets. Encouraging the development of 'strategic entrepreneurship' skillsets will help farmers farm with fewer inputs, giving them greater profitability margins and, simultaneously, farm with fewer emissions. Indeed, future research might investigate the role universities can play, via skills development workshops, in supporting farmers in practically developing these skill sets (Charles, 2016).

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