

When farmers talk to farmers... by Meic Llewellyn

Haitham Hasasneh is an agronomist with twenty years of experience in agriculture. He comes from a village to the north of Bethlehem and now lives in Ramallah, a city in the middle of Palestine's West Bank. "We love our olive trees," he told me when I met him in Machynlleth last week, "and our farmers know each one as an individual. I'm sure Welsh farmers are just the same with their fields, and their sheep." Many of the olive groves – and the trees within them – are over a thousand years old, and the same Palestinian families have been tending the plantations for centuries.

Hill farmers like many of us in Wales, wrestling a living from small family farms, they and their families are used to long hours and hard work. But since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the remorseless spread of their walled settlements, Palestinian farmers are facing a cataclysm. Olive groves have been bulldozed all across the country, as the settlers and the troops that guard them – believing that God has promised all 'The Holy Land' to the Jews – are destroying their new neighbours' livelihoods as an effective way of forcing them out. Access to holdings is often barred for 'security reasons' to the extended family and neighbourhood groups whose help is essential at harvest and for many other tasks, and snaking for six hundred miles across the West Bank the ironically-named 'Peace Wall' cuts many villages off from their ancestral land.

Haitham is undertaking a two-week tour of Wales and Scotland, talking to Fair Trade societies across both countries. He's deeply touched by the support and empathy people have been showing, but above all he would like to talk to farmers themselves.

When farmers talk to farmers... ...it's a different kind of conversation

"Fair Trade is something all farmers instinctively support," he smiled. "Farmers are always in a vulnerable position." Most of all, he'd like to talk to farmers themselves, and to Young Farmers' Clubs in particular. "I've heard how active and creative these groups are in Wales," he reflected, "and I'd love to share ideas and experiences with them. I wonder if some would like to visit us in Palestine? We'd give them a great welcome – they'd be family!"

Practical savvy in areas like marketing and distribution – lessons that have been learned the hard way here in Wales – would be of enormous value to Haitham and his neighbours. Thomas Cazalis, a French agriculturalist working with the Palestinian Farmers' Union, who is travelling with Haitham, commented that growers have been collectively raising the quality and consistency of the oil greatly in recent years. "But distribution is still an enormous challenge," he added. "Capital is thin on the ground, the roads are poor – Palestinians are

barred from the new high-speed roads across their own country, built by the Israelis – and even when consignments reach Northern Europe, Greek and Spanish brands are already very well established.” The Co-Operative has begun to market Palestinian oil on a small scale, and feedback from those who’ve used it confirm that it’s a richly-flavoured and attractive product.

*When farmers talk to farmers...
...understanding comes at once*

Haitham Hasasneh is a big man, with a wide smile and an infectious sense of humour. There’s no bitterness in his tone, and he clearly still loves his work and way of life. But just when he might have thought things could hardly get worse, two years of intense drought have reduced the crop by almost eighty per cent. “We all hope it isn’t a permanent climate change kicking in,” he commented wryly. “Just when we’ve begun to open the markets up.”

Haitham has been reading the history of Wales, and finds inspiration in it. “Your farmers know what it’s like to be oppressed,” he avers, “and marginalized. To be told your way of life is an anachronism, and you may as well sell up and move to the town.” He believes that the determination and inventiveness of the farmers and their families here, combined with a love of their land and its culture, are very close to the feelings of their counterparts in Palestine.

*When farmers talk to farmers...
...practical solutions emerge*

“The Welsh have always been committed to fairness and democracy,” he insists. “We need to be talking. But how do we start this process off?” I didn’t know how to answer him. Do you?

Those interested in developing contacts with Marcello and other farmers in Palestine should contact the author on meic.tycerrig@gmail.com or Nia Lloyd, Wales National Development Officer for YFC, on nia.lloyd@yfcymru.org