

Applying a regenerative food system perspective to the Good Food Cycle



Summary

There is growing interest in regenerative agriculture as an enabler of carbon-negative and nature-positive food systems, including from the UK Parliament (Cunningham-Eurich & Wentworth, 2025). But a narrow focus on regenerative agriculture could overlook opportunities to apply regenerative approaches to food systems more widely, with potential benefits for mutually reinforcing social and ecological health.

FixOurFood carried out ground-breaking research to clarify understandings of regenerative systems and dynamics, resulting in the Regenerative Lens conceptual framework and various associated tools.

Applying the Regenerative Lens to the development and evaluation of the **Good Food Cycle** could focus attention on the kinds of dynamics needed to break free from the degenerative junk food cycle, and build new regenerative dynamics where human and environmental health reinforce each other.

The Regenerative Lens and associated tools could support the identification of win-wins, synergies and positive reinforcing cycles in UK Government policymaking more generally.

Description of the problem

There is growing interest in regenerative agriculture as an enabler of carbon-negative and nature-positive food systems, including from the UK Parliament (Cunningham-Eurich & Wentworth, 2025).

Regenerative agriculture typically focuses on regenerating soil health, which in turn supports delivery of ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and water retention (Newton et al., 2020; Lal, 2020; Tittonell et al., 2022; Bless et al., 2023).

However, a narrow focus on regenerative agriculture risks overlooking opportunities to apply regenerative approaches more widely across food systems – for example in business, education, health, waste management and governance – where there is significant potential for mutually reinforcing social and ecological health (Buckton et al., 2024). Regenerative systems, futures and dynamics are increasingly recognised as powerful framings for encouraging transformative action towards sustainability (Buckton et al., 2023). In food systems, such framings could focus attention on the underlying system dynamics needed to achieve and sustain desired policy outcomes (Buckton et al., 2024), such as the ten interdependent outcomes of the [Good Food Cycle](#).

For example, evidence shows that restored soil health can enhance dietary nutrition, which in turn reduces health system costs (Rosier et al., 2025), and that increasing people's connection to nature can improve wellbeing and strengthen public support for nature restoration (Whitburn et al., 2020). These dynamics illustrate the kinds of positive cascades and feedbacks that remain largely invisible in existing policy approaches, and which could help to break free from degenerative dynamics such as the junk food cycle.

To date, however, we have had limited conceptual clarity about what large-scale regenerative dynamics would look like, limiting the application of regenerative perspectives (Buckton et al., 2023).

Research Findings

Research by the [FixOurFood](#) programme integrated diverse perspectives to design the Regenerative Lens conceptual framework for regenerative social-ecological systems (e.g. food systems) (Buckton et al., 2023) (Figure 1). The Lens is intended as a tool for evaluating the extent to which envisioned futures, strategies, and initiatives align to, and have potential to enable, regenerative dynamics.

As a proof-of-concept, the Regenerative Lens was applied to a strategy development process facilitated by FixOurFood that aimed to understand how the Yorkshire food system could be transformed towards a regenerative system (Buckton et al., 2023, 2024). The Lens was used to push the ambition and imagination of the envisioned future food system.

The Lens has since been used by the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment (IPBES, 2025) and the Belgian Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment (Gorissen et al., 2024), amongst other contexts. It has also been expanded into a guide to [tools for regenerative practice](#) (Buckton et al., 2026a) and a forthcoming accessible guide to regenerative dynamics (Buckton et al., 2026b).

The findings of this research show that:

- Regenerative dynamics occur when social and ecological health mutually reinforce each other, such that “life creates conditions conducive to life” (Benyus, 2002).
- Regenerative dynamics require consideration of wider systems and how their health supports the health of their constituent parts. For example, a regenerative business would not only be taking care of its employees and finances – it would also actively be contributing to the health of wider society and ecosystems on which the business ultimately depends for its long-term survival and flourishing.
- Regenerative dynamics are enabled by factors including an ecocentric rather than human-centred worldview, mutualistic interactions, biodiversity and cultural diversity, agency, and continuous reflexivity and adaptation (Figure 1).
- The Regenerative Lens has been appreciated for its relatively holistic treatment of regenerative dynamics and how it helps people to appreciate interlinkages between different aspects of (e.g. food) systems (Buckton et al., 2024; Villasante et al., 2025).

Policy Recommendations

1. Defra should embed the Regenerative Lens and **associated regenerative practice tools** into the development, implementation, and post-2026 evaluation of the **Good Food Cycle**, to ensure the strategy actively supports reinforcing dynamics that accelerate progress towards its ten priority outcomes. This would help to identify where interventions can break degenerative cycles and build regenerative ones, such as improving soil health to enhance dietary quality and reduce long-term health system costs (whose savings could then be used to reinforce sustainable agriculture incentives, for instance).
2. The **Policy Lab**, **Evaluation Task Force**, **Evaluation Services Unit**, and the **What Works Network** should support the understanding and application of the Regenerative Lens and **associated regenerative practice tools** to identify win-wins, synergies, and positive reinforcing cycles across government policymaking more broadly, such as the **Land Use Framework**.

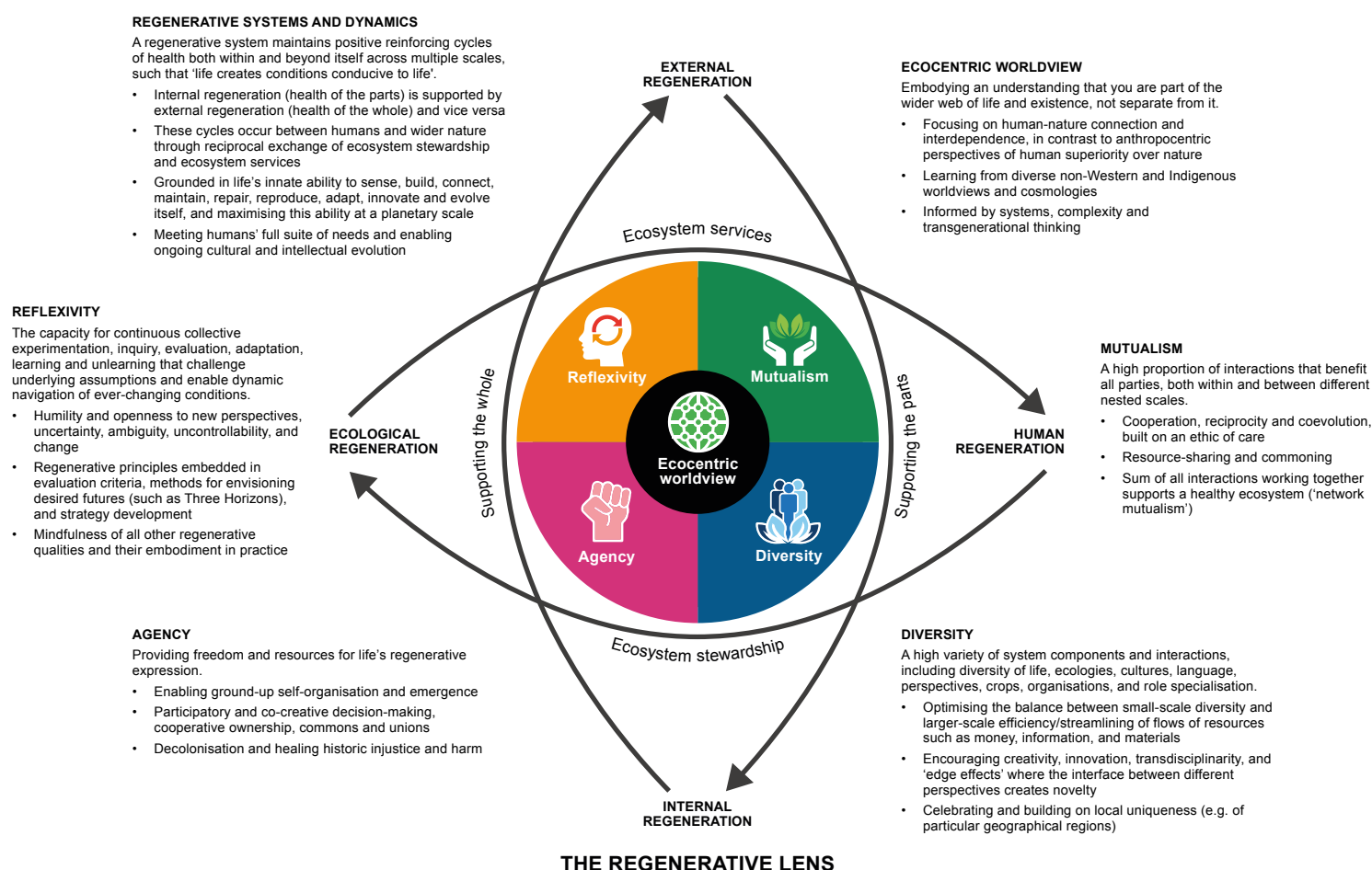


Figure 1. The Regenerative Lens framework for conceptualising large-scale regenerative dynamics. Adapted from Buckton et al. (2023).

References

Benyus, J. M. (2002). *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, 2nd edn. Mariner Books, Boston.

Bless, A., Davila, F., & Plant, R. (2023). A genealogy of sustainable agriculture narratives: implications for the transformative potential of regenerative agriculture. *Agric. Human Values* 40, 1379–1397. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-023-10444-4>.

Buckton, S., Fazey, I., Sharpe, B., Wahl, D., Adams, D., Bayoneta, C., Belzer, A., Chaplowe, S., Colvin, J., Crossland, A., et al. (2026a). Tools for regenerative practice: 30 frameworks, exercises and methods in service of human and planetary flourishing. *FixOurFood and Ecocentric Futures*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19666677>.

Buckton, S., Fazey, I., Bayoneta, C., Sharpe, B., & Tyfield, D. (2026b). An introduction to regenerative dynamics. *FixOurFood and Ecocentric Futures*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20284437>.

Buckton, S.J., Fazey, I., Doherty, B., Bryant, M., Banwart, S.A., Carmen, E., Connolly, A., Denby, K., Kendrick, I., Sharpe, B., et al. (2024). Transformative action towards regenerative food systems: A large-scale case study. *PLOS Sustain. Transform.* 3, e0000134. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pstr.0000134>.

Buckton, S.J., Fazey, I., Sharpe, B., Om, S., Doherty, B., Ball, P., Denby, K., Bryant, M., Lait, R., Bridle, S., et al. (2023). The Regenerative Lens: A conceptual framework for regenerative social-ecological systems. *One Earth* 6, 824–842. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2023.06.006>.

Cunningham-Eurich, I., & Wentworth, J. (2025). Regenerative agriculture. In: POST. <https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0748/>. Accessed 2 June 2026.

Gorissen, L., Bonaldi, K., Haerens, P., & Rato, L. (2024). *Regenerative Development and Design: Its origins, essence, practice and potential as a meta-discipline to elevate governance, innovation and planetary health*. Belgian Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment. <https://www.health.belgium.be/en/research/regenerative-development-design-study-executive-summary-event-report>.

IPBES (2025). Summary for Policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss and the Determinants of Transformative Change and Options for Achieving the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. IPBES secretariat, Bonn. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11382230>.

Lal, R. (2020). Regenerative agriculture for food and climate. *J. Soil Water Conserv.* jswc.2020.0620A. <https://doi.org/10.2489/jswc.2020.0620A>.

Newton, P., Civita, N., Frankel-Goldwater, L., Bartel, K., & Johns, C. (2020). What Is Regenerative Agriculture? A Review of Scholar and Practitioner Definitions Based on Processes and Outcomes. *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2020.577723>.

Rosier, C.L., Knecht, A., Steinmetz, J.S., Weckle, A., Bloedorn, K., & Meyer, E. (2025). From soil to health: advancing regenerative agriculture for improved food quality and nutrition security. *Front Nutr.* 12, 1638507. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2025.1638507>.

Tittonell P., El Mujtar, V., Felix, G., Kebede, Y., Laborda, L., Luján Soto, R., & de Vente, J. (2022). Regenerative agriculture—agroecology without politics? *Front. Sustain. Food Syst.* 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2022.844261>.

Villasante, S., Shannon, L., Liao, C., Betemariam, E., Cunningham, S., Ellis, E., Hausner, E., Huang, Q., Mannetti, L., Otero, I., et al. (2025). IPBES Transformative Change Assessment: Chapter 2. Visions of a sustainable world – for nature and people. In: O'Brien, K., Garibaldi, L., and Agrawal, A. (ed) *Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss and the Determinants of Transformative Change and Options for Achieving the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. IPBES secretariat, Bonn, pp 61–100.

Whitburn, J., Linklater, W., & Abrahamse, W. (2020). Meta-analysis of human connection to nature and proenvironmental behavior. *Conserv. Biol.* 34, 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13381>

Authorship

Corresponding author: Sam J. Buckton at sam.buckton@york.ac.uk

Authors: Sam J. Buckton, Ioan Fazey, Rebecca Newman

Editors: Christopher Yap, Rebecca Wells, Ferne Edwards, Rebecca Newman

This brief draws on action research conducted through the FixOurFood programme. It was funded through the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems programme (2021–2026).