



Why access to land is vital for sustainable, healthy and fair food systems

Strategies for increasing access to land for agroecological farming summary paper

The UK's food systems are in dysfunction – rates of child obesity and diabetes are high and soaring, food poverty is growing, the number of farmers is declining rapidly, soils are increasingly depleted, biodiversity is plummeting and bird and bee populations are threatened by agrichemicals. There need to be transformative changes in food and farming in the UK. Ensuring that land is accessible for agroecological producers is vital to enabling these necessary changes to happen.

In partnership between the Institute of Development Studies and the Landworkers' Alliance, research has been undertaken to identify strategies for increasing access to land for agroecological production, in order to contribute to a transition towards sustainable food systems in the UK. This briefing summarises these strategies.

Why access to land for agroecology matters... and needs to change

Agroecological approaches have demonstrated that it is possible to maintain or increase farming yields while regenerating ecologies and supporting communities. A study of 286 projects covering 37 million hectares globally found that the introduction of agroecological approaches increased production by 79 percent whilst improving ecological resilience.ⁱ More recent research in the UKⁱⁱ found that small-scale agroecological farming yields for vegetable crops were higher than 'conventional' yields across the country. With UK vegetable consumption at unhealthily low levels, and most veg imported, agroecological farming could help improve the nation's health whilst also safeguarding its soils, water and biodiversity.

The research also found that small scale farm holdings employ 3.2 full time equivalent farm workers per hectare (annual work units, AWUs), compared with the UK farming average of 0.028 AWUs. This means that per hectare, small-scale farms generate more than 100 times more employment than the average farm. Agroecological farmers are also more financially viable than conventional farmers. While farm earnings are low (with the majority of smallholders earning less than £10,000 per year), the 'Matter of Scale' study found that the majority (78%) of agroecological farmers did not receive farm subsidies, and of the majority of those that do, the subsidies represent 5% or less of their farm incomeⁱⁱⁱ.

Despite the potentials of agroecological farming to address the many of the problems of our current food systems, a number of barriers are preventing agroecology from spreading, and access to land is a major one.

- **Access to land is a significant barrier for small-scale and agroecological farming in the UK**
In a 2017 survey of aspiring farmers in Scotland, 71% of respondents stated that access to land was a significant barrier, by far the most common response when asked what challenged them to farm. The second was access to housing on or near farmland, cited as a significant barrier by 53%

of respondents. In comparison, only 18 percent cited low profitability of farming as a significant barrier.^{iv}

- **Land in the UK is not scarce, it is unequally distributed**

With 60 million acres of land in the UK, and approximately 65 million people, there is enough land for every individual (including children) to have just under one acre (or a family of five to have five acres). In 2001, Kevin Cahill found that over two thirds of UK land is owned by 0.36% of the population, or 189,000 families.^v

- **High land prices - due to speculation and the treatment of land as a commodity - make it inaccessible for many would-be farmers to purchase or rent land.**

The existing agricultural subsidy system provides payment based on acreage owned. This has actively incentivised land consolidation, leading to higher prices and lower availabilities. Agricultural property tax relief has also contributed to the holding of and investment in land as an asset rather than for farm based livelihoods.

The situation has worsened over the last decade as land prices have skyrocketed out of proportion to the income that can be generated by farming. Farmland prices have increased by 400% over the past twenty years^{vi}. Even adjusting for inflation, the increase in farmland prices has been higher than that of equities or even London residential property. This overvaluation of land is great for investors and speculators, but for agroecological farmers it is problematic that land prices are so removed from farming incomes.

- **Tenure agreements are often too short or unfavourable for the long-term investments that agroecological farmers make in the land**

Investments of time and resources for any type of farming are difficult if not impossible to transfer from one site to another, and the transferability of investments in agroecological farming is even less feasible. Agroecological farmers invest heavily in building soil health, sculpting landscapes, creating water management systems, cultivating long-term plants such as trees and windbreaks, supporting animal health and welfare and building up customer relations and supply chains.

- **In addition to obtaining the land itself, housing is also a major difficulty for many would-be producers**

Acquiring planning permission for housing on agricultural land is difficult due to regulations that were originally intended to preserve the availability of agricultural land. The inability to live onsite is problematic for agroecological approaches to farming, as they often require frequent contact with the land, which is most feasible – economically and in terms of time – when living on site. In addition, new farm businesses often do not generate enough income to secure a mortgage on a home nearby or support extra transportation costs.

How we can make land more accessible

1. *Work with planning authorities to make better use of existing planning policy*

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) already contains many tools which could be used to facilitate access to land for new farmers. Improving planning authorities' understandings of agroecological farming, what it is and how it fits with local authorities plans and objectives, could help to facilitate more agroecological production for the public interest. This would also save time and financial resources of both planning authorities and farmers.

- **Improve understandings of when housing on site is needed**

Existing planning policy allows for agricultural residence when there is an ‘essential need’ to be on site, which includes both functional and financial viability, criteria that most agroecological farms would meet. However, misconceptions about the viability and importance of land-based livelihoods amongst planning officers means that most applications to live on site are denied in their first application. Many council officials consider it a “ludicrous idea” that anyone could make a living off a very small piece of land.^{vii} This notion is clearly challenged by the ‘Matter of Scale’ research cited in earlier in this briefing. While many farmers receive planning approval at the appeals stage, the appeals process requires a great deal of time and money (both for farmers and planning agencies) and many farmers who could be viable do not gain approval. Other new entrants to farming are deterred from even embarking on the process – a significant problem considering the sharply declining number of farmers.

Improving understandings about agroecological farming, for example through Continual Professional Development courses for planning officials, could help to avoid inefficient appeals processes while still safeguarding agricultural land from developers and hobby farmers.

- **Create a land demand registry**

Agricultural ties are currently being removed—and farmland developed—due to a perceived lack of demand for agricultural land, whilst many prospective farmers are prevented from farming due to lack of access to land. A registry of prospective farmers seeking land could help ensure that agricultural land is not lost whilst also ensuring that people looking for farmland are aware of what is on offer.

An agricultural tie can be removed if a property is advertised on the market and there is no demonstrated demand. However, this relies on both chance of seeing the ad and financial capability to respond, rather than an institutionalised process. If a local registry of people seeking holdings were to be kept, it would become impossible for vendors seeking to remove ties to argue that there is no local demand. Such registries already exist for housing: all local authorities in England are obliged to keep a register of people interested in land for self-build housing in their jurisdiction (per the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015). They are required to provide serviced sites for them and must also take the register into account when developing local plans. Given the widespread lack of access to land for farming and the public benefits of agroecology, there is justification that a similar registry of the demand for farmland for agroecological production would be in the public interest.

A land registry could also enable landowners who have unused land to connect with landless entrants or people looking to expand their farmland. Organisations such as the Landworkers’ Alliance have been planning to institute a matching service for some time and the Fresh Start Land Enterprise Centre is already doing this though at a limited scale. While these initiatives are valuable, instituting a governmental registry could have stronger influence local and national planning decisions.

- **Distinguish agroecological practice**

Being able to identify distinguishing characteristics between small scale agroecology and conventional farming could help leverage existing planning policy for agroecology. If agroecology were to be effectively distinguished from industrial or agrichemical based agriculture, the existing planning system could discontinue permission for agro-industrial use of land, and grant new

permission for agro-ecological use in its place. This could potentially catalyse changes in practice among existing farmers, which could have a big impact. Demonstrating the public interest to planners, and producing or synthesizing the evidence might facilitate the policy and cultural changes necessary for this to happen. Here, England could learn from Wales' experience of implementing a One Planet Living policy (see text box).

Learning from Wales – Supporting One Planet Living is in the Public Interest

Wales, with a similar planning system to England, has developed a One Planet Policy with a view to encouraging highly sustainable and self-supporting land-based projects. The policy is used to grant permission for developments in the open countryside which would not otherwise be permitted. Such developments are required to provide for the minimum needs of the residents in terms of income, food, energy and waste management within five years from starting work on the site. Residents are allowed to earn further income from other activities including employment off-site, but must generate the minimum essentials from on-site land-based activity. Detailed management plans are required and form part of the occupancy conditions where permission is granted. Overall the requirements are very rigorous (requiring large volumes of evidence and documents on plans for the site) and there are some concerns the standards are in fact too high. After six years, only 23 individual smallholdings were up and running under the scheme.

- **Define affordable land**

Given the inaccessibly high costs of purchasing and renting farmland, it has been suggested that affordable farmland should be defined following a similar model as affordable housing. Using a formula relating to what can be produced from that land, an affordable price could be determined. This could be combined with requirement that a certain amount affordable land be made available. The UK could also learn from France's model which seeks to support small-scale farm viability through indexing land rental prices relative to agricultural prices.

Learning from France – Supporting human-size farms through tenancies

While the UK government has pursued a policy of trade liberalisation and the consolidation of farms in order to increase trade competitiveness, the French government has aimed to ensure the persistence of viable human-size family farms, even as it aims to intensify agricultural production. Approximately 80% of French farmland is worked by tenants rather than landowners. Tenant farmers have secure rights, with automatically renewing leases of a minimum of 9 years. Rents are indexed relative to agricultural prices. In contrast to the situation in the UK, rent control is aimed at limiting the profit that non-farming landowners can make on the land. In direct contrast with DEFRA policy, the French Land Development and Rural Settlement Associations (SAFER) system specifically aims to restrict consolidation by regulating the land market, through a pre-emptive right of purchase for farmers when land is sold.

Local agricultural administrations also restrict the rental of farmland if (a) farmers already farm land and would be deemed to have too large a farm with the additional land, (b) if it would destroy an existing farm that is still viable and (c) if the future farmer does not have the required agricultural training, is too old, or has too much non-agricultural income.

2. *Work with local councils*

- **Shape Neighbourhood Development Plans**

As per the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), parish and town councils can write a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NPD) for their area, which can be used to increase access to land for agroecology. This could include prioritising market gardening opportunities in peri-urban areas or using Section 106 agreements and Agricultural Ties to secure affordable housing for farmers. Providing it does not contradict local or national policy, and subject to a local referendum, the NPD is then formally adopted as part of the Local Development Plan.^{viii} Developing or shaping neighbourhood development plans is rarely done, perhaps because planning officers, local councils or citizens are unaware of them or because other issues take precedence.

- **Bring back (or save) county farms**

County Farms—owned by local authorities^{ix} and rented out to farmers—have been a route into farming for many new entrants over the past century, but are currently being lost. Initially established as part of the Smallholdings & Allotment Act 1908 under which councils had a statutory duty to meet the demand of applications by young persons to enter into farming, provision is now discretionary, and many council farms have been or are under pressure to be sold.

While a major reason for council sales of these assets is to raise money for the provision of services, counties such as Norfolk and Cambridgeshire have demonstrated that investing in smallholdings can generate revenues. The DEFRA smallholdings reports of 2009/10 and 2014/15 demonstrate that council owned farmland generates a return of 0.84% on capital invested. While some county councils may be determined to pursue higher return investments, the investment in farmland for agroecology can enable councils to meet other objectives such as the promotion of healthy eating and outdoor activity for local residents, or increasing local resilience in terms of food supply and flood risk reduction.

3. *Encourage the release of portions of large landholdings for agroecological farms*

The release of relatively small proportions of existing estates for sale or rent to agroecological farmers is voluntarily happening at a small scale and could be encouraged more through, for example, the use of fiscal incentives. A report produced by the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) proposes that the government could use such incentives to release, for example, 1% of holdings of 1,000 hectares or more to provide new affordable smallholdings near existing settlements. They recommend that this should be under the form of a structure such as a community land trust or a long lease that ensures continued agricultural use.^x

Large estates or large farms which are already voluntarily letting out portions of their land to agroecological producers are seeing the benefits of improved the public image of the estate or the supply of their farm shops. There may be opportunities to encourage this voluntary practice on a larger scale through collaborating with large landholders.

4. *Support community purchases of land*

The establishment of a new community right to bid for farmland could facilitate more agroecological production with direct social benefits. Allowing communities to bid for farmland that comes onto the open market could help facilitate land being used in the public interest, rather than being used simply as a commodity for investment. This model has been used in Scotland and England could

learn from Scotland's land reform (see text box), both in terms of process and content. The CPRE has additionally suggested that support may be needed to facilitate this process, such as a national community assets fund or tax incentives for social investors or landowners selling to community groups.

Learning from Scotland – Land as a common good for the public interest

Scotland has enacted several Land Reform Acts over the past 15 years, which led to the reframing of land from a commodity to 'a finite and crucial resource that requires it be owned and used in the public interest and for the common good.' This led to the community right to buy and a government strategy to see 1 million acres of land owned by communities across Scotland. There is currently a £10 million annual land fund for community purchases. While communities have the right to buy land—even if the seller is unwilling—if they can demonstrate that it is in the public interest for them to do so, the passing of this legislation has resulted in an increase of private land owners selling or renting their land on a voluntary basis to community groups in order to avoid long court battles. Most sales today are 'negotiated consent in the shadow of the law'.^{xii}

While conditions in Scotland are quite distinct from those in England, both politically and in terms of population distribution, the process by which public engagement produced political pressure for change is one we can learn from. In addition, the two frameworks used by the Scottish Land Reform Review Group are internationally recognised: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN's Voluntary Governance for Responsible Land Tenure.

5. Enact fiscal reform to support agroecology

A number of higher level approaches have been proposed to facilitate access to land for agroecology, which entail revising taxation policies.

To incentivise longer tenancies, agricultural property relief (from inheritance tax) could be restricted to land which is let out on tenancies of longer than ten years. This would incentivise landlords to grant longer tenancies. Other options could also include restricting property relief to ecological farms, though this presents a possible definition challenge.

To prevent the intergenerational concentration of landed wealth, estate taxes could be increased, as suggested by Chris Smaje and Cordelia Rowlett in their policy paper for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Agroecology^{xii}.

A land value tax (a tax levied on the value of unimproved land) has been proposed as a potential solution to a variety of problems, from high house prices, to business tax avoidance, by groups ranging from the free-market oriented Adam Smith Institute to the Labour Land Group. This is essentially a reversal of the existing subsidy system in which farmers receive payments for the amount of land that they own; instead, owners of farmland would pay tax based on the value of their land. Andy Wightman, a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) who has been involved in the successful land reform in Scotland, explains that this could help put a downward pressure on land prices, ultimately reducing farm debts and increasing profits. An extensive literature base discusses Land Value Tax and its pros and cons. One useful resource is a debate between Simon Fairlie of Monkton Wyld and Alanna Hartzok of the Earth Rights Institute, published in *The Land*.^{xiii}

Making it happen – alliances and land literacy

The main obstacle to increasing access to land for agroecological farmers is arguably awareness of the possibilities and benefits for doing so by those who have the ability to put policies in place.

Creating alliances between individuals and organisations working to reform land, as well as with councillors, planners and neighbours is an important step in working towards awareness for change.

There is a distinct lack of forums for land based organisations to talk and consider how to work together more effectively. Establishing a land use commission – following Scotland’s example – is one very clear way forward and has been suggested by the CPRE. Identifying specific areas for reform is essential. As Andy Wightman, a key figure in the Scottish land reform process notes, for reform to happen there needs to be concrete asks and demands.

Effective movements need to be both land literate and politically literate, drilling right down to the section or act that needs to change on a particular issue. As Andy Wightman states, ‘we cannot allow those in power to be on the front foot while we are there waiting.’^{xiv}

This briefing has been prepared as part of the Transitions to Agroecological Food systems project, a multi-country participatory research partnership between the STEPS Centre at the Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex), the Landworkers’ Alliance in the UK, the Farmer to Farmer Initiative (UNAG) in Nicaragua and the Forum for a Sustainable Rural Development (FODDE) in Senegal. The briefing was drafted by Elise Wach based on research led by Clare Ferguson, and presentations and deliberations undertaken by small-scale ecological farmers and key experts in January and February 2017 as part of the project. Special thanks to Chris Smaje for additional inputs. For more information, please visit <https://www.ids.ac.uk/project/transitions-to-agroecological-food-systems> or contact Dr Elise Wach, e.wach@ids.ac.uk

This paper can be cited as:

Wach, E. and Ferguson, C. (2017) ‘Why access to land is vital for sustainable, healthy and fair food systems. Strategies for increasing access to land for agroecological farming summary paper.’ Brighton, UK: STEPS Centre

ⁱ Pretty, J., Noble, A., Bossio, D., Dixon, J., Hine, R., Penning de Vries, F. and Morison, J. (2006) ‘Resource-Conserving Agriculture Increases Yields in Developing Countries’, *Environmental Science and Technology*, 40.4: 1114-1119

ⁱⁱ Laughton, R. 2017 ‘A Matter of Scale’, Landworkers’ Alliance and Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience

ⁱⁱⁱ In the study, 78% of respondents received no subsidy, 14% received subsidies amounting to less than 5% of their income, 4% received 5-20% of income from subsidies and 1% received 80% of income from subsidies.

^{iv} Nourish Scotland (2017) *Wanted: Land for New Farmers*, Scottish Farm Land Trust

^v Cahill, K. (2001) *Who owns Britain* Canongate Books

^{vi} Jaevicious, A., Huston, S. and Baum, A. (2015) ‘Two centuries of farmland prices in England?’ Said Business School Research Papers, University of Oxford 2015-8

^{vii} Oli Rodker, speaking of his experience in applying for planning permissions as part of the Ecological Land Cooperative, Transitions to Agroecology Workshop, Bristol UK, 25 January 2017

^{viii} Planning Help: Neighbourhood Development Plans, CPRE, Available from <https://planninghelp.cpre.org.uk/planning-explained/neighbourhood-planning/neighbourhood-development-plans>

^{ix} Often these farms are owned by counties but some city councils such as Brighton & Hove also own farmland

^x Willis, G., 2016 ‘New Model Farming: resilience through diversity’ Food and Farming Foresight Paper 1, CPRE

^{xi} Peacock, P., (2016) Speech delivered at ‘Land for What’ conference, November 12, UK

^{xii} See http://agroecology-appg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/key_policies_for_agroecology_in_the_uk.pdf

^{xiii} The Land, Issue 8, Winter 2009/10. Shorter version available here: http://commonground-usa.net/hartzok-alanna_land-value-taxation-panacea-or-placebo-2010.htm

^{xiv} Wightman, A. (2016) Speech delivered at ‘Land for What’ conference, November 13, London, UK