

# the plot.



community food growing news

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cfgn@riseup.net

www.cfgn.org.uk

facebook/cfignetwork

@cfgn\_growers

## Editorial Note

The last green tomatoes have been plucked from their stems and the first winter sowings have grown strong enough to be planted out in the new autumn. As the garden settles into the October chill there is a time to take a moment and reflect on the hot part of the season; parts of conversations from over the brassica beds, remembering to prepare the tomato feed earlier next year, and the surprise special moments whether it was thriving pak choi or the new neighbour who's first gardening gloves are muddled with a season's charm.

In The Plot this issue there are snippets of conversations and activities collated to share news from around London community gardens and elaborate on fresh and old discussions. E-mail [cfgn@riseup.net](mailto:cfgn@riseup.net) if you have an idea for an article or artwork for the next issue in three months time.

After 18 months of research CFGN will be launching policy proposals this autumn for the new London Plan being written by Mayor Sadiq Khan and the city hall team. You can find the policies designed to respond to needs of community food growers, such as long-term secure access to land, on the website [cfgn.org.uk](http://cfgn.org.uk). If you want support taking these policy proposals to your local council please get in touch.

CFGN has also been active on the steering group for the 'Land for what?' weekend which will be held on the 12th and 13th of November and has been organised with eight other organisations looking to collaborate for meaningful land reform in the UK. See the opening article written by Robin Grey, Tom Kenny, and Alice Martin for more info and background on this mobilisation.

Sam Bourn outlines the experience at Sutton Community farm of setting up community shares to consolidate community involvement in the enterprise, and Natalie Szarek reflects on the

inclusivity of livelihood-creation in the community food sector through Audacious Veg. With the Nyéléni forum bringing together farmers, growers and campaigners from across Europe in Romania this November there are two articles dedicated to exploring the meaning of food sovereignty. UK delegate Mama D explores the relations of the food grower/producer and Melanie Strickland reports on local food sovereignty initiatives with Organiclea in Waltham Forest.

Finally by popular request there is a 'New Members Corner' with this issue hearing from London Grown who have been working in the last year to set up a community market garden and education hub on 7 acres of land in Enfield.

Thanks to all the contributors for taking time to share their experiences and ideas, and also to Joel Colovers who has once again laid out the words and images for your pleasure!

## Land for what?

Robin Grey, Three Acres & A Cow  
Tom Kenny, Shared Assets  
Alice Martin, New Economics Foundation

Today, as a country, we face huge problems – widening inequality, a chronic housing crisis, a dysfunctional agricultural system, multiple public health issues and impending climate collapse. Land is one of the root causes of these problems but is rarely discussed. Indeed, land has been the elephant in the room of English politics for so long we have become accustomed to its absence during important debates.

The fundamental importance of land becomes clear when you start reframing common questions about the key issues affecting society today:

The housing crisis is partly caused by patterns of land ownership that prevent us building enough new, affordable homes: Britain has the second highest concentration of land ownership in the world with 0.36% of the population owning two-thirds of the land. Despite claims we are running out of land, a recent Office For National Statistics report found that a mere 2% of our country is built on. So is the housing crisis caused by an increasing population or should we be tackling patterns of land ownership that prevent the building of new homes?

The rising cost of land is directly linked to policies that make it lucrative to hoard land and treat it as an investment... Agricultural land is currently seen as safer and more lucrative than stocks and shares, and a way of avoiding tax, regardless of whether it is even being used for farming – indeed prices have trebled in the last ten years. In some parts of the country, landowners see their land increase in value more than a hundred fold just for securing permission to build housing. How can land and housing prices be brought under control when government policies and market speculation actively drive them up?

Inequality finds its oldest expression in the clash between the landed and the poor: A third of UK land is still owned by the traditional aristocracy and landed gentry. 47 wealthy landowners each receive over a million pounds a year in land subsidies, whilst the smallest farms receive nothing. How can we develop a more equal society, whilst giving massive tax breaks and public money to large landowners, at the same time as cutting back on support and services for those in need?

These unhealthy patterns of land ownership and usage have come to dominate much of the rest of the globe. The British government and companies based in the UK are still involved in practices which clear people from their land without their consent. How can we prevent these new land grabs from happening? How can redress the damage caused by colonial practices?

Many public health issues are directly linked to trends in land use. Recent studies have connected

issues like cancer, respiratory disease, and poor mental health with city living. Cash-strapped councils have started to sell off public parks and playing fields to plug funding gaps. Tate and Lyle Sugar have received more in agricultural subsidies than any other UK organisation this century. How can we tackle obesity and other health issues whilst subsidies flood the market with low quality, cheap food, and people are disconnected from the outdoors?

Environmental decline is directly linked to mainstream land management: British soils are at a crisis point. Industrial farming methods, deforestation, and land cleared for sport shooting, have all been linked with floods that have

devastated the UK in recent years. How can we tackle environmental issues whilst subsidising the industrial farming techniques that help cause them?

Driving Change Through Collaboration

In short, the status quo benefits the few at the expense of the common good. So how do we address this imbalance? One answer is to support the coming together of all groups who have a stake in this fight, be that urban housing and planning advocates, rural land and farming communities, health campaigners or climate change activists.

What sort of conversations would residents of a council estate up for redevelopment have with a young farmer? What common ground would be found between people campaigning for less sugar in our diets and people campaigning to reduce the negative environmental impacts of farming? What can an urban planning expert learn from people campaigning to protect our public footpaths in areas of natural beauty, and vice-versa.

Finding Common Issues

These groups, and indeed the population as a whole, share a common issue – that land is not being used for the common good. They also share potential campaign targets – the planning system, land-based subsidies, and transparency and distribution of ownership, to name just a few. Who knows what else they share? Up to now there has been little overlap between these groups, and almost no focus on land as a common issue. Framing our struggles in terms of land rights, ownership and usage, will allow us to find much in common with a wide range of people.

Building A Movement

On November 12th – 13th a coalition of activist networks and organisations are coming together to begin building a movement, hosting a two day series of conversations under the banner of ‘Land For What?’. Gathering in Resource for London, Holloway Road, we aim to raise awareness of land as a common struggle. This means increasing people’s knowledge about land ownership and the history of land struggles; connecting people to share skills and experiences; and inspiring people and groups to take learning and energy for change back to their communities.

The conference is being made possible by a coalition of groups; Community Food Growers Network, Just Space, Landworkers’ Alliance, New Economics Foundation, Radical Housing Network, London Quaker Housing, Ubele, Shared Assets, Three Acres And A Cow, and London Community Neighbourhood Co-operative.

To find out more see [www.landforwhat.org.uk](http://www.landforwhat.org.uk)

## COMMUNITY SHARES?

Sam Bourn, Sutton Community Farm

Sutton Community Farm is a 7.1 acre smallholding in south London. It was set up in 2010 as a response to community demand for access to locally grown, sustainable food. The farm also exists to provide an inclusive shared space for the wider community to learn, interact and cultivate skills. As well as volunteers, there are visits from school groups, disability colleges, probation services and businesses from across London. Educational work is centred around food production, cooking and healthy lifestyles. A key example are the six week long autumn after-school cookery clubs for parents and children which have just begun.

The farm also supports land-based employment: growing vegetables with organic principles that are distributed in a VegBox scheme selling over 200 boxes per week to local households, and wholesale to restaurants in central London. There are currently two paid apprentices undergoing 18months training and an ongoing Farm Start programme. This article will hopefully demonstrate how the farm interacts with the local community through its management structure and community shares.

Legal and Management Structure

To consolidate community involvement with the farm, it was registered as a Community Benefit Society (as set out by the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014). Community Benefit Societies exist to serve and benefit the wider and collective interests of a given community above that of private benefits for an individual, its staff, its members or its committee. This legal structure reflects the community-led ethos of the farm and enables it to issue community shares. These shares are non-profit making and cannot be traded on the open market.

The Society has Members (Shareholders), a Management Committee, and a Secretary. The Management Committee ensures that the society is working for the benefit of community. Members are encouraged to attend, speak and submit motions to be considered at Members’ Meetings and they are entitled to stand, vote and elect representatives to the Management Committee. Fair and equal representation is maintained as each Member is entitled to one vote only regardless of the number of shares purchased. There are a set of governing rules for the farm held by the Plunkett Foundation; these set out in detail Members’ rights and the management and constitution of the farm.

Community Ownership

As seen in the creation of community owned shops, bakeries, pubs and renewable energy projects, the farm offers an ownership stake through purchasable shares. Investing in a share yields a social dividend rather than a financial reward helping the farm to continue its work. Shareholders are invited to be directly involved in shaping the business and assisting with decision-making, but this is not compulsory. Share capital is withdrawable after five years.

The first community share offer closed on 29th February 2016. The farm is now community owned by over 140 shareholders who made at least a minimum investment of £30. This investment has contributed financially to the farm and helped to support a sustainable, resilient form of agriculture that benefits people as well as the environment. The initial target of £10k was exceeded raising an important contribution to the working capital of the enterprise as well as helping to fund several projects.

Reflections

Changing the company status and organising the share offer was not without complications. Altering the legal status of the company is time



consuming and can pose problems in maintaining existing agreements. There is a significant amount of paperwork and administration required that could be burdensome on a small organisation. There is also the challenge of communicating effectively how the shares function. The reasons to become a community shareholder must be evident and as with any investment, there needs to be clear strategies to overcome any potential future risks to reassure investors.

Yet despite these points, involving the community in supporting and organising the farm through the share offer and management structures demonstrates the way in which local food brings people together, and ensures that the enterprise is run for the benefit of the community and the environment.

The farm recently hosted the Annual Members' Meeting where we sat outside the veg-shed in the sun. A performance report was circulated to all parties following the initial share offer and set out how the capital had been used to implement planned improvements. There were discussions regarding the VegBoxes, updates from the farm and volunteer teams and proposals for future endeavours. The meeting made evident the advantages of the farms business structure: involving shareholders along with their experiences and skills and providing representation for the community. I left feeling very inspired by the achievements of the farm and the many people that are involved in it.

The farm is about to open a second community share offer to continue growing and welcome others who may want to be involved. Some existing shareholders participate in the day-to-day running of the farm as staff, volunteers and stakeholders, others are veg-box customers, but many are individuals who just share the values of the farm and want to support local food production, land-based employment, sustainable farming and community engagement. Increased involvement in the farm helps to support the preservation of this shared space for the community to cultivate skills. Shareholders are welcome to get involved as much or as little as they want.

[suttoncommunityfarm.org.uk/join-in/](http://suttoncommunityfarm.org.uk/join-in/)

## Grower/Producers, Food for & from the Commons

Mama D

Community Researcher and Facilitator and grower.

'Food Sovereignty' as a movement has captured the imagination of the already partially informed masses. How might this concept be further engaged with to improve its 'fit' to the needs expressed by the majority world's populations? How might it reach the margins of our perspectives and our abilities to identify, understand and engage with that which is outside of our usual frame of reference?

We can't just battle with words, or, can we?

Key food sovereignty words include: producers, workers, consumers, markets, distribution, system and nature or sustainability. And, of course, food itself.

Over the next few issues of The Plot, I will engage the reader in a critical excursion, maybe an uncomfortable boat trip, around the territory of these terms and reflect on their potential role in moving us towards a more sane relationship between human eating and the maintenance of the planet that we are eating from.

Let's begin with the notion of 'the producer'. Who is that person? Is it the farmer in the industrially constructed field or plantation, supervising the production of commodities for sale to a speculative market? Is it the smaller scale, organic, grower of vegetables, fruit or flowers to the upmarket supermarket or farmer's market? Perhaps hill crofters or the artisanal fisherfolk are genuine producers, being so closely connected to the production cycle? However, if we are to consider the burgeoning urban population needs, might we not include the urban gardeners and food growers as the real producers, often employing permaculture devices and methods to produce sustainably?

We can also consider what is being produced and how. There is the land itself which produces in accordance with its capacity to yield materials which we consider useful to us. We can even conceive of the idea that every element of the overall production system has a productive capacity: the clouds yield moisture, the soil yields nutrients, the plants yield their seed, or roots or leaves, the farmer or grower yields their labour and so on.

What about understanding production at different scales? Not only would the above 'factors of production' be producing but also we could look at the levels of the system at which food is processed. The farmer might produce the cocoa bean, sugar and milk but it is the chocolatier that produces the chocolate. Beyond this advertisers create products which are sold in the market place and point of consumption artisans and cooks take the chocolate and other processed ingredients to produce further tertiary offerings: tiramisu or profiteroles for 'global produce markets in swanky malls or select food halls.

In addressing 'producers', who exactly are we speaking of? Does the term producer create an arbitrary distinction between elements of the system in a way that does not necessarily serve us? Especially if we need to head towards a balanced global food system that better acknowledges the role of all of the parts in creating an alternative to the current exploitation and poisoning of much of the planet?

In such an alternative we'd have to reckon with the food system as an entity far more complex than we care to imagine: a composite of many systems responsive to the overlapping and interwoven histories of social movements, coloniality, and a counter-evolutionary narrative of food scarcity.

When we host discussions amongst or look to the particular perspective of those who are conventionally termed producers are we creating and recreating a politically and technically very partial analysis of a much larger sub-system? Are we not blinkering our potential perspectives of a more joined up, intricate world?

The 'grower/producer' perspective has a history. Producers, as growers, within a global market place are those who owned or acquired the means of production.

Although the lowly peasant or 'campesina' had and has direct relationship with the act of growing, she did not, especially under an international patriarchy of explorer-conqueror-discoverer-as-masculine narrative, realise the gains of growing. Rather it was the master, or overseer-manager, within a colonial narrative of food-as-a-weapon-of-control in the global market, itself run by imperial agents, who called the tune.

The grower, asserting food rights, has not always been identified as the producer, certainly not the



producer of commodities to 'feed the world'.

The grower/producer in the UK, and much of Western Europe, is an artefact of colonial relations over time: a 'settler' form of privilege based upon an understanding, within the global market, of food,-as-commodity – a 'thing' to feed people with.

We have a whole, constructed story, a neutral 'Colombian Exchange', to

refer to what was one of the most violent and destructive appropriations under imperialism, and currently globalisation, of the intellectual property production of thousands of peasant and rural dwellers. This passively drawn 'exchange' also conceals the ingenuity of urban and rural women and men in processing and combining foodstuffs to form palatable and nutritious meals, sustaining populations for millennia.

How can we model the notion of production such that it forces us to understand the interfaces of all aspects of production, locally and globally and how these interact to create inequalities or to foster opportunities?

Critically, grower/producer perspectives, which dominate narratives in food sovereignty, blame corporates and an anonymous 'food system'. But mostly without engaging with the complex specifics of the global situation and how it is embedded in the geo-politics and histories which currently shape it in intricate ways.

This promotes a very linear, mechanistic and segregative way of thinking about the challenges and reinforces a patriarchal mind-set which is pervasive in the mainly male, producer-led epistemologies. Not only do feminist deconstructions have a role in debunking some of the platitudes common in food sovereignty discourses, but intersectional analyses are necessary for unearthing the roots, of 'grassroots', and the hidden, and sometimes ugly aspects of food system histories.

Such histories may make us uncomfortable, but they also stand to more effectively empower the narratives of those marginalised by the more dominant ways of thinking about how we grow, who is a grower and the politics of production and growth in our very uneven allocation of power in growing circles.



# Building the Food Sovereignty movement locally

Melanie Strickland,

Community Food Movement Builder (OrganicLea)

One of our core aims at OrganicLea is to be the instrument of wider social change by connecting local food with global justice - we refer to this work as 'system change.' We're currently focusing efforts on developing food sovereignty locally in Waltham Forest.

This work has various strands. One aspect has been to organise outreach events and activities. We recently ran a film night on food sovereignty as part of Waltham Forest's Cultivate Festival. Whilst the attendance was not as high as we hoped, the quality of the discussion was impressive. An ad hoc spoken word performance and song at the end made the event quite special. We produced a detailed plan for the evening with short films illustrating each of the six food sovereignty principles, which we are happy to share so that the event can be replicated. Also during Cultivate, we ran a 'Local Roots, Global Shoots' info stall as part of a day of food-related celebrations at the Hornbeam community centre. We found that free samples of the products, which included local beer, bread, as well as Zaytoun olive oil and Zapatista coffee, were a real draw and definitely encouraged people to buy the goods afterwards. We produced information sheets on the political struggles small producers in Palestine and Mexico face, and why we were selling their products as a way of demonstrating our solidarity. Everyone seemed keen to learn a bit more about the story behind the product. Our aim was to build support for the food sovereignty principle of valuing food producers. The stall was a success and something we hope to run again, ideally alongside another event to ensure that there will be plenty of passers-by.

We have also invested time in developing a strong relationship with the Council. This has yielded some results and the Council is developing its food strategy with input from OrganicLea and other grassroots projects. The next stage is for the Council, in partnership with the community, to develop a food charter, which we hope will recognise our aspiration for a community controlled food system. From policy documents they

have shared with us so far, it seems that they do understand the need to take a holistic view on food – recognising its connection with public health, the environment, and the local economy. We hope to influence procurement decisions in the Council - in schools and in Whipps Cross hospital for example, and our contacts in the Council seem to be receptive to this, although they have stated that they are currently tied into contracts which they will review. There is more work to be done, and other parts of the Council are not necessarily on the same page. For example, a number of Costa's have opened in Waltham Forest recently, space that could have supported local food enterprises instead.

Another way we are building food sovereignty locally is by trying to develop a local 'People's Food Forum'. There are many excellent food projects in Waltham Forest, addressing different problems in the food system, including food waste, food poverty, lack of growing space, lack of gardening skills and more. There are lot of skilled, community spirited people, but we could be an even stronger force if we were more co-ordinated and organised. One outcome of this is that it could make us more influential in discussions with the Council, and would provide a network for mutual support. This addresses the food sovereignty principle around building knowledge and skills. But building up relationships and trust takes time and patience. To start with informal monthly meet ups have been proposed, like Green drinks but with a food focus.

OrganicLea is expanding its farm start programme, and has an ambition to support six new market gardens in the next few years. We are supporting new entrant growers with training and practical resources. This addresses a number of the food sovereignty principles including localising the food system and working with nature, as we are supporting people who are committed to low impact, ecological growing practices. This also means more people can be supplied with nutritious, organic food.



All this work is happening alongside our established programme of outreach activities, such as the monthly open day and regular volunteering days. We are trying to think more strategically in how we use lunchtime announcements and newsletters to communicate and develop local food sovereignty. Finally, the positive results OrganicLea, and others, have achieved has been reinforced (and perhaps fed into) other strong community campaigns in the Waltham Forest area. A major win for the fossil fuel divestment movement happened right here this autumn, with Waltham Forest Local Government Pension scheme committing to divest in 5 years.

## Work or Leisure: dilemmas of the local food movement

Natalie Szarek, Audacious Veg founder

Food growing is enjoying a popular revival: London boasts a thriving local food scene, with dozens of inspirational projects which bring people together- building communities, providing training, and growing delicious food. Yet it can be difficult to convince people that growing food is more than simply a leisure activity- that it can also be a career that provides a decent livelihood. And in fact, for most people involved it is a leisure activity: volunteers tend to vastly outnumber the paid staff at these projects.

This is not a problem in itself- volunteering is a fantastic way to learn new skills, grow social networks and have transformative experiences. Someone who starts volunteering at a community garden for whatever reason (mental wellbeing, to socialise, or because it's trendy) becomes part of a community which values environmental sustainability, champions local food networks, and seeks to re-imagine what kind of food economy is possible in this country. This is how movements gain momentum- because more and more people see this kind of social change as relevant and important.

However, there are some drawbacks to having a volunteer-heavy local food economy. When the entry points into paid work in local food are mostly through extensive volunteering, this may have a knock-on effect on who the staff of food growing projects end up being. Volunteering is not accessible to or practised by everyone equally: research shows that a third of the adult population

make up nearly 90% of the volunteer hours in the UK, and that population is more likely to be middle aged, highly educated and be in managerial or professional occupations.

Anyone who has spent time at a community growing project can observe that the local food movement in London is incredibly diverse in terms of ethnicity, class and age. However, based on my observations the staff of community food growing projects are usually more likely to be educated, white and middle class than the people who volunteer at the project. As a white, middle class, university-educated person who has worked in community food growing projects, I am striving to be an ally and working to build a movement that is more widely relevant and representative. Even more shocking is the demographics of professional commercial farmers – official stats are scarce but according to the national media, there are probably only two black farmers in the whole of England.

Why does the demographic make-up matter? Although I do believe that there is an intrinsic value to diversity, on a practical note, a local food revolution is far more likely to actually happen if more people in society see and experience it as being relevant to them. We make better decisions if we bring different viewpoints and experiences to the table, and we learn more about how to build the kind of society we want to live in. This was one of the motivations behind setting up Audacious Veg, a social enterprise I founded which provides work and training in food growing to unemployed young adults. I wanted to make local food relevant to a broader demographic than Londoners who spend their Saturdays at farmers markets. By offering paid entry level positions in food growing as part of a (grant funded) employability programme, Audacious Veg makes local food something relevant to the lives of young adults who would never relate to local food as consumers: but they are proud to be producers.

Very few community food projects in London could suddenly replace volunteer roles with paid staff positions, and that's understandable. However, I do think it's important to have regular conversations in the local food movement about diversity. I can't pretend that there are easy solutions to ensure that our movement is constantly and effectively challenging patterns that perpetuate oppressive race and class dynamics, but I do think that paid entry level positions – specifically open to people who do not come from a place of educational, class and race privilege - are one positive step that we can aspire towards.

I'd also like to celebrate the great work being done by really great London projects to build a diverse local food and sustainable gardening movement. Granville Community Kitchen, a



food justice initiative in South Kilburn, and Living Under One Sun, a community garden in Tottenham, are inspirational organisations that mobilise communities for food justice.

In the USA, various programmes (largely funded by a combination of government funding, charitable funding, and trade income streams) provide employment for local young adults in areas of high unemployment. Some of these programmes pay hundreds of inner city teenagers a wage to work at local urban farms: I challenge our government to make this kind of investment into our young people and our food systems. By putting more emphasis on pathways to paid work in the local food sector, we would be better able support a new generation of farmers to grow our food on a commercial scale, and work for these jobs to be widely accessible and financially equitable.

I would also be thrilled to see a government-funded programme inspired by the “Women's Land Army” of the First and Second World Wars: paid agricultural employment to keep the farm economy functioning in the face of a labour shortage. The average age of UK farmers is still 59 and rising, and barriers to entry are significant. There is some amazing work being done by FarmStart programmes in Manchester (Kindling Trust) and London (OrganicLea) and the Ecological Land Cooperative to make commercial farming more accessible. I do believe that social change comes from localised, grassroots mobilisation like these initiatives -

I also believe that large scale support in the form of government funding and policy would make a huge difference to further this vision.

I have no doubt that our growing local food movement is capable of causing a massive shift in how our country feeds itself. I think that urban projects are a crucial part of this shift: engaging, training and growing a community of new generation farmers, as well as making sure that consumers and growers, together, are having the conversation about how we build a national food system that is sustainable and equitable.

# New Members Corner: London Grown

London Grown is a new workers' co-operative based at seven acres of council-owned land in Enfield that has been derelict for the last 15 years.

The not-for-profit organisation aims to design, build and co-operatively run an ecological food growing and education hub that increases access to fresh, healthy food, and community space in the local area.

In the last six months, as well as joining CFGN, the group has cleared 3 acres of brambles, reconnected the water supply, finished the first stage of building a classroom space and began to run open volunteer

sessions. A belt of woodland has been left around the site to maintain biodiversity and a relaxing green space to grow food. The project is looking to build relationships with community groups in the area as it develops programmes in the space.

Over the winter the group will be continuing to clear brambles, set up an 8 year field rotation and mulch the land. London Grown are aiming to plant out in spring and to start distributing fruit and vegetables next year.

The project is committed to developing progressive financial models to produce food that is accessible to all and provide livelihoods for workers. It would be brilliant to hear from community food organisations that have experience of this or models to share – especially considering high London rents and agricultural subsidies heading only to large-scale farms.

Regular volunteer sessions will be running on Mondays 2-4pm into winter.

Please contact [londongrown@gmail.com](mailto:londongrown@gmail.com) for more information or see @londongrown (FB) and @london\_grown (twitter).

We look forward to hosting a food growers gathering in the near future!

