Land
Values, rights and reforms
**Land reform is fair and fruitful**

What with ‘fighting’ hunger and tackling food ‘insecurity’ we’re used to macho metaphors in all about food. But when it comes to land, these get literal. The quiet and creeping violence that malnutrition inflicts on the poorest is compounded by strong-arm tactics: forcible evictions and land clearances, armed security guards and military intervention.

Large-scale acquisitions in Africa by water-poor countries have brought land issues to the fore. However, as Michael Taylor reports (p.4), the most prolific big buyers are western-based companies, and smaller, speculative land grabs by national elites are a bigger source of pressure in many countries.

In some respects, this accelerated drive for land tenure is just the latest turn in an epic conflict over agricultural resources. Tenure has been at the forefront previously, for instance in the Scottish land clearances or, recounts Robin Palmer (p.7), in the Victorian sequestration of Rhodesia. Yet a combination of other factors – unequal bargaining, credit arrangements, labour laws and sheer purchasing power – have also contributed to the reality that as consumers in wealthy countries our footprint extends far beyond the territories that we occupy, could claim equitably, can readily reach or have even heard of.

Nevertheless, tenure matters hugely to improving nutrition and tackling poverty. The groups at greatest risk of dispossession include precisely those whose access to land is most crucial to global food security, those who grow the food eaten by the people most vulnerable to hunger. According to Taylor, the majority of the 500 million small-scale producers who grow around 80% of food in the global south use land under customary tenure regimes, leaving them to ‘tenants of the state’, without legal protection or recognition.

In a recent report to the United Nations General Assembly Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, says that many such small-scale producers are being driven onto smaller plots, more marginal territory or off the land. ‘Their livelihoods and food security, already fragile, are further compromised. He finds that “access to land and security of tenure are essential to ensure the enjoyment of not only the right to food, but also other human rights, including the right to work (for landless peasants) and the right to housing”.

The bulk of De Schutter’s report is about solutions to this problem, not only securing tenure to protect existing land access but also, more radically, agrarian reform to redistribute land rights more fairly. Protecting tenure for poor people means protecting them from eviction, providing legal tools and support to defend their rights, and combating corruption. Benin and Burkina Faso are among countries that have implemented low-cost and accessible forms of land use registration.

Among the most controversial land reform efforts globally has been Zimbabwe’s ‘fast-track’ programme of the past decade, which has been seen as violent, chaotic and harmful to the country’s economic and food security. Yet even in that instance, say Ian Scones and colleagues reporting on a major study of its outcomes (p.9), the results are mixed: notwithstanding the widely reported abuses, their findings have ‘shut holes in the myths that there is no investment going on, agricultural production has collapsed, food insecurity is rife, the rural economy is in precipitous decline and farm labour has been totally displaced’.

The more voguish alternative to state-led agrarian reform is to privatise parcels of land, yet this is not without problems. According to De Schutter, the expectation that land will underwrite poor people’s access to credit, so they can invest and lift themselves out of poverty, has often proved naïve in the face of actual lending practice and the reality that vulnerable people don’t want to gamble their only security.

At first glance, the contrast between market and state-led approaches to distributing land tenure looks to be founded on a simple clash between different logics of development: one utilitarian, focused on resource efficiency; the other egalitarian, placing a priority on secure tenure as a safety net. But it isn’t. The contention is that non-market approaches can be fairer and more efficient. In De Schutter’s words, ‘land sales tend to favour not those who can make the most efficient use of land, but those who have access to capital and whose ability to purchase land is greatest’. The case for agrarian reform hinges not only on its contribution to reducing poverty, but also on World Bank analysis showing that more equitable land distribution has been associated with greater per capita economic growth.²

With higher rents but lower human stakes, this debate is parallelled in Britain. For Simon Fairlie (p.24) the reason to fight the sale of county council-owned farms is not simply that they provide a rare chance for small-holders to enter a market in which the cost of small parcels of agricultural land dwarves their production value, but also that small-holders can provide economies of distribution where larger operations offer economies of scale. If energy becomes very tightly constrained, then economies of distribution could become more important.

The overall message is that we don’t face a trade-off – whether in the UK or the global south, we aren’t forced to choose between land equity and efficiency. Securing tenure for small-producers who can’t afford it in the market is important to achieving both.

**References**

1. De Schutter (2010) [http://tinyurl.com/3xw8qc](http://tinyurl.com/3xw8qc)

Increasing commercial pressures on land

Where are we heading?

The International Land Coalition (ILC) is working to create open debate on large-scale land acquisitions, and the alternatives. A global alliance of 83 civil society and intergovernmental organisations, their mission is to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men through advocacy, dialogue and capacity building. Michael Taylor reveals why their work has never been more important.

Since the food crisis in 2008 the world has woken up to a new phenomenon – land acquisitions by cash-rich but water-poor countries such as South Korea, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Abu Dhabi. Concentrated largely in countries that are unable to meet their own food security needs, the moral dilemmas it poses are stark.

The World Bank’s recent report ‘Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can it yield sustainable and equitable benefits?’ estimates that 42 million ha of land was subject to investor interest in 2008 alone. Because of the lack of transparency in many such deals, the true figure is unknown, but work being done by the ILC, Oxfam-Norrb, CIRAD and the University of Bern (due for release in 2011) indicates that it is probably many times higher than current estimates.

Debunking myths

The way land is allocated and managed plays a central role in enabling or hindering economic development, food security, social justice, and environmental sustainability at local, national and global scales. High profile deals by countries like Saudi Arabia make the headlines, but most reported large-scale land acquisitions are made by western-based companies motivated by profit, not national security. And although largescale acquisitions are most visible, the cumulative effects of many small and medium ‘land grabs’ by national elites is in many cases a greater source of pressure on land in host countries.

In many cases this involves privatisation common-pool resources for little or no cost and holding it for speculative purposes, including eventual commercial production by foreign investors. And the myth that there are swathes of unused, unimportant and available land is just not true, despite its continued use as justification for land acquisitions.

Four-fifths of food production in the global south comes from 500 million small-scale farmers, livestock-keepers and fisherfolk. Most of these producers are among the 1-2 billion people and natural resources under customary tenure regimes, the land and natural resources on which they live classed as ‘state land’. Their land rights are not legally recognised or protected, and so it’s this land that’s most vulnerable to being ‘grabbed’ by governments.

Protecting the commons

Increasing global demand for energy, a rising population and an expected doubling in demand for food raises the stakes in competition for land and natural resources. Research undertaken by the ILC amongst its members on the links between land tenure and food security emphasises some basic principles: insecure and inequitable access to land have fuelled, facilitated and increased vulnerability to food price volatility; secure and equitable access to land works as a safety net to mitigate risks related to food price volatility and assured long term food security; and equitable and secure access to land and diversified production are key to protect ecosystems, combat land degradation and ensure food security.

The competition for land and natural resources has always been an uneven competition with the poorest losing most. But this competition is no longer simply a factor of increasing population, a shrinking resource base due to degradation, or the speculative efforts of local elites. Land is becoming a globalised commodity; local producers competing for the same resource with large international companies that produce food, fuel and fibre, sequester carbon, sell large ‘unspoilt’ landscapes to tourists, extract minerals, or – increasingly – seek to realise short and medium term gains for investor capital.

As land, which was often held for the common good, is being individualised and commodified, it becomes a good of increasingly transnational significance. Traded across countries, the idea of land being sovereign property that aligns with territorial boundaries no longer holds. One of the findings of the World Bank report is that investor interest in large-scale land related investments is highest where governance is weakest. Here we see a gradual rolling-back of the state from ensuring accountability and providing services. Studies in Peru’s area converted from smallholder production to large production estates of private companies paint a picture of rural ‘communities’ relying on companies for employment and every form of service provision including water, electricity, health, education and road maintenance.

Such rural private ‘feudalism’ can bring economic gains, but create a situation of extreme vulnerability for the rural populations within them to the desires and demands of a private enterprise driven by interests that may not be aligned with those of local populations.

Counterbalancing the trend towards territorial control by private companies are the successes in gaining recognition for the legitimacy of ‘territorial development’ for local communities. Indigenous groups in particular have been successful in gaining tenure and management rights over extensive areas of land based on customary land use and management practices. This allows local communities to define for themselves the trajectory of land and natural resource-based development that they would like to work towards. It also gives local communities some autonomy in managing the competition for land and natural resources. By recognising a legitimate ‘owner’ of extensive tracts of land, the vulnerability of common-pool resources to being individualised sooths economic or political elite is reduced. And so the large-scale registration of tenure rights at community-level over the commons is a key priority.

In parallel to these two competing forces are global imperatives relating to food and fuel security, climate change and carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation and human rights.

Playing catch-up

Initially the rise in land acquisitions caught governments unawares, and they lacked the tools to adequately interpret or manage these phenomena. Now they are trying to catch up. New Zealand, Brazil, some states of India, for example, are moving towards banning the sale of agricultural land to foreigners. Donor and UN agencies are working on proposals to provide global benchmarks for good land governance and responsible agricultural investment, in particular FAO’s Voluntary Guidelines on good governance of land and natural resources, and World Bank/FAO/IFAD/UNCTAD’s Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment. Some form of global benchmarking, accountability, or regulation is necessary, but exactly what forms these should take is open to question.

Moreover, the relative influence of these processes in the face of the overwhelming influence of global markets and trade regimes is at best limited. Building an informed global response to the increasing tide of land-related investments depends on understanding more fully its drivers, impacts and trends. ILC is finalising a series of case studies and thematic studies undertaken with over 30 partner organisations worldwide. One of the emerging findings across the case studies is in relation to who wins and who loses from large-scale land related investments. Inevitably those that are already poor lose most, particularly women and common-property users.

The growing body of empirical evidence has the potential to feed a more informed debate on appropriate responses. Evidence of this is the World Bank’s report, whose empirical basis gives an unprecedented opportunity to examine the winners and losers in large-scale land-based investments. The report admits that ‘many investments… failed to live up to expectations and, instead of generating sustainable benefits, contributed to asset loss and left local people worse off than they would have been without the investment’ (p.51). Although...
the optimistic conclusions of the report may still be somewhat out of sync with its empirical evidence, a shift is discernible in the interest with which the World Bank now appears to be balancing the opportunities and risks posed by large-scale land-based investments.

Investment in agricultural production in the south is sorely needed after two decades of declining support to agriculture by donors and many governments. However, what kind of investment is needed should be carefully considered. As the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Professor Olivier De Schutter, warned in a recent address to the General Assembly, the current crisis and fear of food shortages should not lead to short-sighted solutions that undermine both the food security of the poorest and their land rights.

De Schutter has made the link between access to land and food security a major focus of his tenure as the Special Rapporteur, arguing that foundational to the right to food and rights and increased land concentration.

The debate between small-scale and large scale agricultural production models is not new, and remains controversial. It is now taking place within a context of increasingly fierce - and uneven – competition for scarce resources. The implications of not taking action, or taking the wrong action, are far-reaching and hard to undo once done.

Attempts to devise global-level mechanisms to guide questions of land governance and land-related investments deserve wide debate, and to include in that debate those most affected. The International Land Coalition, with farmers’ organisations in Latin America, Asia and Africa, Action Aid and Oxfam, has launched an initiative to expand dialogue on large-scale land acquisitions and their alternatives. This will provide a platform for open debate among all stakeholders. It will allow voices currently sidelined to be heard, provide a wider array of evidence and opinions to influence decision makers in the choices they make on this question.

We are living in a world of increasingly scarce land, water and natural resources. It is a world where factors influencing access to land are interconected at the global level, with rising concentrations of land and power. Opening up space for all who have a stake to influence decisions on how their land and natural resources are used, whether at local, national or global levels is an important task in the struggle for peace, food security and equity.

(Author)

1. This article is based on the personal views of the author, and should not be taken to represent those of the International Land Coalition

Robin Palmer discovers there’s nothing new under the sun, as he looks back on an early chapter in his 1977 book Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia called ‘The Age of the Fortune Hunters’.

The book describes how, in late Victorian times, the British Government granted a Royal Charter to the millionaire imperialist Cecil Rhodes, giving him carte blanche to exploit for 35 years the territories we now know as Zimbabwe and Zambia. That Charter was based on highly dubious land and mineral concessions signed with local chiefs spuriously claiming to rule all of those lands.

After Zimbabweans rose up against the misrule of Rhodes’ British South Africa Company in 1896, a new administrator ruefully observed that his predecessor had ‘given nearly the whole country away’ to speculators who ‘promise any amount of things, but the execution thereof is delayed till the Greek Kalends’ (c.e. forever). One hundred and twenty years later new concession hunters are on the march, seeking control over African land and water to augment food security back home, principally in the Persian Gulf and East Asia. They are finding willing local accomplices, eager to lease out vast tracts of land in return for derisory payments and illusory promises. As in colonial times, local people are almost never consulted.

I have been collecting material on large-scale land grabs for almost a decade, and I worry greatly, for it carries strong echoes of Cecil Rhodes and his merry men. The FAO/SAD report, released in 2009 and authored by hundreds of agricultural experts, identifies small-scale farmers as a key target group to successful food systems of the future, and calls for a shift in paradigm in this direction. It has launched an initiative to expand dialogue on large-scale land acquisitions and their alternatives. This will provide a platform for open debate among all stakeholders. It will allow voices currently sidelined to be heard, provide a wider array of evidence and opinions to influence decision makers in the choices they make on this question.

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(Footnotes)

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Michael Taylor is Programme Manager for Global Policy and Africa at the secretariat of the International Land Coalition, based in Rome, Italy.
coast. The deal looks rapacious", and it warned against resurrection of old-style colonialism: "That day must not come."

In comparable vein, concerns that 3,000, possibly rising to 10,000, Chinese settlers would be allowed to run farms in the Zambezi Valley caused such an uproar that the Mozambique government was forced to dismiss the story as false, while further north, newspapers reported that Tanzania suspended investments worth millions of dollars after protests over the eviction of farmers to make way for biofuels.

Biofuels are indeed a contradictory and hugely controversial factor relating to global land grabbing. The recognition that the world’s oil reserves are finite, coupled with oil price rises, led to a frantic search for alternatives globally. Biofuels were initially seen as a strong option and were hugely hyped, Brazil, which has been using them as fuel for decades, was widely cited as a success story and a model for others to follow. Indeed, 15 African countries have now made arrangements for the use of Brazilian technology.

But Brazil has been criticized for adopting a monoculture approach which has destroyed the livelihoods of many peasants.

American Midwest farmers were given huge financial incentives to turn their maize into biofuels (ethanol). This contributed significantly to the US food price crisis of 2007-8, which led to well documented riots and deaths in many countries like those that have recently occurred in Mozambique.

EU countries signed up to an undertaking to use a greater proportion of biofuels in transport. However, while the move was very welcome as an approach to climate change, EU countries to-date have been slow to act. Meanwhile, desperate poor countries such as Mozambique were problems, failures and abuses, but the overarching story is not simply one of collapse and catastrophe. It is much more nuanced and complex.

As Amos Bwalya noted, "In Zambia, the land formal re-allocation since 2000 has increased by 163% compared to 1990s averages. Edible dry beans and cassava have weathered the storm relatively well. Maize production has become more controlled, large-scale farm sector has resulted in heavy hits on certain commodities and markets. There are still more than four million hectares of large-scale commercial farms. But only around 200-300 white-owned commercial farms are still operating, mostly having been displaced, along with a substantial number of farm workers."

For desperately poor countries such as Ethiopia, Malawi and Mozambique, biofuels are seen by many as a magic route out of poverty. Mercifully, much of the early optimism over the potential of biofuels is now dimming, as recognition grows that some of the claims made by its advocates were inaccurate. What was once regularly described as a ‘miracle cure’ has now become more of a ‘problem’.

Responses to global land grabbing have been remarkably muted, at least until very recently. Researchers and policy makers seem somewhat timid and complacent in their conclusions, desperately eager to seek painless ‘win-win’ solutions, and quick to retreat to ‘each case is different; the devil lies in the detail’ formulations.

I find it curious that enormous amounts of time and resources are being invested in drawing up international, but always voluntary, codes of conduct or guidelines in an attempt to regulate land grabbing. It will be impossible to bring to account companies which violate them. They will increase the likelihood of poor people losing their land, and, as Jun Borras and Jennifer Franco argue, are ‘likely to facilitate, not block, further land-grabbing and thus should not be considered, even as a second-best approach.’

I also agree with Ian Scoones that such principles are ‘doomed to failure’, given the lack of capacity, failures of institutional authority, corrupt practices and so on." highlighted in the World Bank’s much delayed report, Ruing Global Interest in Farmland, published in September 2010. Based on studies in 14 countries, the Bank found ‘several cases’ of investors circulating rumours to ‘create the impression that the investments had been finalized and had already been approved at a higher level, either strengthening the investor’s negotiating position or allowing the investor to strategically co-opt local leaders.’

Researchers noted: ‘An astonishing lack of awareness of what is happening on the ground even by the public sector institutions mandated to control this phenomenon,’ while ‘a key finding from case studies is that communities were rarely aware of their rights. All this implies a danger of a “race to the bottom” to attract investors... the risks associated with such investments are immense...land acquisition often deprive local people, in particular the vulnerable, of their rights without providing appropriate compensation. In a number of countries, investors are treated more favourably than local smallholders.’

The Telegraph (12 September) felt that ‘the World Bank appears deeply torn. While the report for the Bank’s open-door globalisation agenda, the sub-text dissents on every page.’

At an AAGP meeting at the House of Commons in January, I asked the Tanzanian High Commissioner, ‘what if, at a time of great food insecurity, a foreign company working in your country exported food back home?’ She replied ‘we would not allow it; we are in the process of drawing up a code of conduct which would prevent such a thing happening, and if any company refuses to sign it, they won’t be allowed to operate.’ We must fervently hope that she is proved right.

What much of it currently happening is illegal, such as the fencing off of large tracts of Mozambique’s coastline by the elite, depriving fishing communities of their livelihoods. I suggested to Oxfam (my former employer) that it might be an excellent use of its resources to issue local activists with wire cutters to restore open access to the coast. Sadly, this is unlikely to happen, but a great deal of imaginative thinking and action are needed to address this highly dangerous new Scramble for Africa.

Robin Palmer is a land rights activist.

Ian Scoones, Nelson Marongwe, Blasio Mavedzenge, Felix Muirimbiramba, Jacob Mahenehene and Chrispen Sukume

Zimbabwe’s land reform has had a bad press. Images of chaos, destruction and violence have dominated the coverage. While these have been part of the reality, there have also been successes, which have thus far gone largely unreported. The story is not simply one of collapse and catastrophe. It is much more nuanced and complex.

As Zimbabwe moves forward with a new agrarian structure, a more balanced appraisal is needed, requiring solid, on-the-ground research aiming at finding out what happened to whom, where, and with what consequences. This was the aim of work we carried out in Manzvi province over the past decade. The question posed was simple: what happened to people’s livelihoods once they got land through the ‘fast-track’ programme from 2000?

The answers are extremely complex, and discussed in detail in the new book ‘Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Myths and Realities’. The research involved in-depth field research in 16 land reform sites across the province, involving a sample population of 400 households. The study area stretched from the higher potential areas near Gutu to the dry south in the lowveld.

What we found was unexpected, contradicting the overwhelmingly negative images of land reform presented in the media and much academic and policy commentary. There were problems, failures and abuses, but the overarching story was much more positive: the realities on the ground did not match the myths.

Radical change

Across the country, the land formal re-allocation since 2000 has resulted in the transfer of nearly eight million hectares of land to over 160,000 households. If the ‘informal’ settlements, outside the official ‘fast-track’ programme are added, the totals are even larger.

Two main ‘models’ have been at the centre of the process – one focused on smallholder production (A1 schemes – village-based arrangements or small, self-contained farms) and one focused on commercial production at a slightly larger scale (A2 farms). In practice, the distinction between these models varies considerably, with much overlap.

Events since 2000 have resulted in a radical change in the nation’s agrarian structure. At Independence in 1980, over 15m hectares was devoted to large-scale commercial farming, comprising around 6,000 farmers, nearly all white. This fell to around 12m hectares by 1999, in part through a modest, but in many ways successful, land reform and resettlement programme, largely funded by the British government under the terms of the Lancaster House agreement.

The Fast Track Land Reform Programme, begun in 2000, allocated more than 4,500 farms to new farmers, making 20% of the total land area of the country, according to (admittedly rough) official figures. This represents over 145,000 farm households in A1 schemes and around 16,500 further households occupying A2 plots – a significant shift to many more small-scale farms focusing on mixed farming, often with low levels of capitalisation.

There are still more than four million hectares of large-scale commercial farms. But only around 200-300 white-owned commercial farmers are still operating, most having been displaced, along with a substantial number of farm workers.

Mixed results

This major restructuring has had knock-on consequences for the agricultural sector. The transfer of land from the narrowly-controlled, large-scale farm sector has resulted in heavy hits on certain commodities and markets.

Wheat, tobacco, coffee, tea and beef exports have all suffered. On average, from 2001 to 2005, wheat production decreased by 27% and tobacco production by 43%, with more dramatic declines from 2006. Maize production has become more variable too, with average production over this period down by 31% from 1990s levels.

However other crops and markets have weathered the storm and some have boomed. Aggregate production of small grains has increased by 165% compared to 1990s averages. Edible dry bean production has expanded even more, up 282%, Cotton

“No one knows how much land in Africa is involved or how many people are affected”

We invite you to submit your feedback at www.foodethicscouncil.org.
production has increased slightly, up 13% on average. The agricultural sector has certainly been transformed, and there are major problems in certain areas, but it emphatically has not collapsed.

Yet aggregate figures – with all the caveats about accuracy – only tell one part of the story. Understanding the consequences of land reform requires finding out what is happening in the fields and on the farms.

In Masvingo province about 28% of the total land area was transferred as part of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, according to official figures. Much of this land was previously cattle ranches, with limited infrastructure, low levels of employment and only small patches of arable land, often irrigated patches around homesteads.

This was taken over by over 32,500 households on A1 sites around homesteads.

Stepping up, stepping out

This radical transformation of land and livelihoods has resulted in a new composition of people in the rural areas, with diverse livelihood strategies. In order to understand more about who was doing what, we undertook a ‘success ranking’ exercise in all 16 sites across Masvingo province. This involved a group of farmers from the area ranking all households according to their own criteria of success. A number of broad categories of livelihood strategy emerged from these investigations.

Over a half of all the 400 sample households – across A1, A2 and informal resettlement sites – were either ‘stepping up’ – accumulation of assets and regular production of crops for sale – or ‘stepping out’ – successful off-farm diversification. These households were accumulating and investing, often employing labour and increasing their farming operations, despite facing many difficulties.

Not everyone has been successful – 46.5% of households were finding the going tough, and not regarded as ‘successful’. Some were really struggling and only just ‘hanging in’; others were in the process of ‘dropping out’ through a combination of chronic poverty and ill health. Joining the land invasions and establishing new farms… was not easy.

By Ian Scoones

Others without start-up assets have been unable to accumulate, continuing to live in poverty, reliant on the support of relatives and friends. Some joined a growing labour force on the new farms, abandoning their plots in favour of often poorly-paid employment. Within the ‘stepping out’ category some were surviving off illegal, unsafe or transient activities that allowed survival but little else. Still others were straddling across two farms – one in the communal area and one in the new resettlement – and not really investing in the new areas, while some simply kept the plot for sons or other relatives.

Such variable outcomes are unsurprising; in the period since 2000 there has been virtually no external support. Government was broke and focused efforts on the elite few, and NGOs and donors have shied away from the new resettlement areas for political reasons. Instead, most new farmers have been reliant on their own connections, enterprise and labour. Without support to get going, many have found it difficult, and it has only been through a combination of access to assets, hard work and luck that they have really made it.

Some have done so due to the widely reported phenomenon of patronage. These are the ‘cronies’ of the party, well-connected to the machinery of the state and able to gain advantage. So-called cell phone farmers, they preside over areas of often under-utilised land. Yet, despite their disproportionate influence on local politics, they make up less than 5% of the total population in Masvingo province. And even in the Highveld provinces the situation is much more diverse than mainstream portrayals suggest.

By Ian Scoones

Overall, in our study sites there is a core group of ‘middle farmers’ – around half of the population – who thrive because of sheer hard graft. They can be classified as successful ‘petty commodity producers’ and ‘worker peasants’ who are gaining surpluses from farming, investing in the land from off-farm work and so able to ‘accumulate from below’. This is having a positive impact on the wider economy, including stimulating demand for services, consumption goods and labour.

Our decade of research in Zimbabwe has addressed the abuses of the land reform programme, but has also dispelled the myths and engaged with the realities of the majority. Solid, empirical evidence has shot holes in the myths that there is no investment going on, agricultural production has collapsed, food insecurity is rife, the rural economy is in precipitous decline and farm labour has been totally displaced.

There are many institutional and policy challenges ahead, but from our research we believe it’s possible to define a positive, forward-looking agenda for the future.

By Ian Scoones

Joining the land invasions and establishing new farms... was not easy

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Liz Carney

By James Currey

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Ian Scoones is co-director of the ESRC STEPS Centre at the University of Sussex and joint convenor of the ESS-Hosted Future Agricultures Consortium. He is an agricultural ecologist.
Gender and land reforms
A hidden issue

Gender relations and women’s rights are central issues within land reforms, but discussion of these has been marginalised, writes Susie Jacobs.

Most land reforms, historically and in the contemporary developing world are based on the ‘household’ model, in which land is redistributed to individual households or families. Women tend to be viewed primarily as wives and mothers, accordingly, land titles or land permits are commonly granted to the ‘head of household’, nearly always considered to be a man.

Within smallholder households as in other types of household, women usually play crucial roles in food processing as well as in domestic labour and caring work within and outside the household. Smallholder or peasant farms are also units of production, and women work on the land to raise crops for consumption and for sale, and in associated work such as small livestock husbandry. This is particularly true in some parts of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa, where women predominate in agricultural production. Women take active roles in agriculture in other societies, however, even where their roles are less acknowledged. 9

Yet despite their active roles within agricultural production and their responsibilities for provisioning, in many societies women do not hold land and do not have decision-making powers over agricultural production.

By raising household incomes, improving food security and reducing rural poverty, agrarian reform affects the economic conditions of people as well as the political realm (for example weakening the landlord class; giving democratic rights to the rural poor; lessening social differentiation). It also has an effect on gender relations. A greater degree of autonomy for smallholder/peasants. Realisation of these objectives, however, remains highly gendered, with women affected differently to men within their households and communities.

Comparative studies on women, gender relations and land reforms. Rural-urban differences across 18 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America 7 show mixed results for women.

Many land reforms programmes, particularly in recent years, have allowed female-headed households (widows or divorcées) with dependent children to hold land or land permits. Many redistributionalist land reforms raise incomes within households and increase food security 1. Households in which a woman is the main worker and where household income is not always redistributed equally among family members, but some redistribution usually takes place and this has often benefited wives. This was the case in Andhra Pradesh, India, where women saw a rise in women’s safety and food security as an important marker of success of redistribution of land.

Less beneficial outcomes are, unfortunately, more numerous. Many landholders who receive titles or land permits under communal land titling or land redistribution do not redistribute equally among family members, but some redistribution usually takes place and this has often benefited wives. This was the case in Andhra Pradesh, India, where women saw a rise in women’s safety and food security as an important marker of success of redistribution of land. 6

Changes in family structure are also common outcomes of land reforms, particularly because most land reform planners promote a nuclear family model. Wives in nuclear families often feel they have more influence over the husband. 10 However, a trade-off often takes place in which the husband gains more control and formal power, both because he holds land rights and because he is more commonly present to monitor his wife. In Libya, in theory rural women could participate in training schemes set up during resettlement and land reform, however, in practice they became more isolated within household roles and took less part in decision-making either outside or inside the home. 13

In China’s agrarian reforms enacted under Fei and then under Deng, women’s land rights were frequently met with violence. 22 Violence precipitated a backlash to their land rights; particularly because most land reform planners believed that ‘women’s plots’ of land to cultivate food crops.

The first concerns law and custom in many regions, which either prohibit or discourage women’s landholding, or which grant women inferior rights. Examples include some interpretations of sharia law, and African customary law which prohibits women from holding land except on a temporary basis. 7 Custom and practice in other regions has similar effects.

A second concern involves interlocking beliefs and orientations that stigmatise women as embodied beings, apart from their mothering roles. Examples include taboos on women undertaking ploughing in south Asia 12, or fears about pollution in China, where traditionally women should not undertake fieldwork during their menstruation. 15 More widely, where agriculture is socially important, masculine identity is often seen as bound up with landholding, as well as with control over women’s labour and their bodies. Hence, land comes to be bound up with sexuality. The idea that women should control land and agricultural decision-making is sometimes met with shock or fear. 16

Not surprisingly, agrarian movements are sometimes driven by similar attitudes. Historically often led by men, they are seen as movements for landless or land-hungry men to gain or to regain land (see below). 19

Thirdly, women’s abilities to gain land or land rights are frequently met with violence. In China’s 1950s post-revolutionary (and pre-collectivised) redistribution the largest in history, women gained unprecedented (and rarely repeated) rights to land. However, women asserting land claims were often attacked. “Hundreds of thousands of women lost their lives attempting to assert land rights.” (Davin 1988:143). 17

Although the scale of these events is unusual, in contemporary settings women continue to face intimidation.

What is to be done?

To some extent, the marginalisation of women within land reforms simply repeats widespread attitudes about women’s ‘place’ within rural societies. Nevertheless, some issues can be addressed through legal and political change, and within agrarian reform programmes themselves: Where women face legal discrimination, the law should be amended to give them rights to land equal with men. In much of Latin America, for instance, wives are now able to have independent title or else joint titles to land with husbands. 20

Where land is held communally - as in some parts of Africa - mechanisms other than privatisation of land should be sought; ‘titling’ or individualisation is usually part of market-oriented reforms for women are often poor and so are particularly likely to lose any newly-acquired land in the marketplace. 21 It is crucial, however, that women are able to claim the same rights as men in their own groupings (such as communities, kin groups, households).

Land reform programmes and their administrators need to take women’s agricultural roles seriously, offering training, extension advice and opportunities for credit. Provision of infrastructure also helps combat male bias. Lack of, or shortfall in provision of schools, clinics and roads affects women disproportionately.

Historically, women have made most gains within agrarian reforms where there exists backing for gender sensitive measures – for example rights for female-headed households, practical training and advice, and mechanisms for adjudication of disputes between husband and wife.

One of the most contentious areas concerns wives’ rights to remain on land in case of divorce. It is common for wives to be ejected from land and to lose their livelihoods along with their infants. Divorced or deserted women do not have legal rights to land even in areas controlled by the progressive Brazilian land movement, the MST. 14 Women also need safeguards against violence – both in general, and in cases of violence precipitated a backlash to their land claims. But whilst changes in legislation are important, they are often insufficient in themselves. For instance, in China, women – who have legal rights to land – have won legal cases, but village leaders sometimes bluntly refuse to implement the judgement. In Anhui, women in one village had land taken away forcibly by the village committee. They went to court and won, but the village leader said, “You may have won the suit but we are not going to give you anything.” (Li and Bruce 2005: 319–20). 20 This scenario indicates that any legal pronouncements about women’s land rights must be enforced (literally) on the ground.

State-backed redistributionalist land reforms only take place after hard-won battles, but present opportunities to enhance women’s as well as men’s livelihoods, rights and lives.

Campaigns for women’s land rights have had few advocates: women’s movements are often urban-based and many agrarian movements avoid the issue of gender equity. This is, however, beginning to change. The MST has female leaders, and some land reform programmes have targets for women beneficiaries. The World March of Women participated in the Nyuini forum on food sovereignty in 2007, 19 at the invitation of Via Campesina. Participants focused on women’s access to land, water and seeds and on the need for recognition of women’s roles in food production.

By and large, however, the struggle for recognition that land is a gender issue remains to be won. Women’s contributions and rights need to move from ‘the margins to the centre’ within social movements and political organizing to achieve more equitable and sustainable agrarian reforms.

Dr Susie Jacobs is a Reader in the Department of Sociology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her most longstanding research interest concerns gender issues in land rights, agrarian reforms and agrarian movements.

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

“Masculine identity is often seen as bound up with landholding”
The big question

What is the biggest pressure on land and how can it be managed?

Land use for resource extraction in developing countries has been a contentious issue for centuries, be it for cash crops, precious stones, wood products, minerals or fossil fuels. The vast majority is exported in raw form to be processed elsewhere for the benefit of rich countries and their companies. Too often, it has been exploitative – of people, land, water and air.

Increasingly, richer nations are turning to land in developing countries to supply two more resources for export: food and bioenergy. At a time when nearly one billion people are hungry, this is highly controversial. Access to food is a basic human right, but people in many developing countries are food insecure. ActionAid has already witnessed conflicts with people who have been displaced off the land, often without proper consultation and compensation (see ActionAid’s campaign on biofuels at www.actionaid.org/uk/biofuels).

Poverty and insecurity often exists because of the lack of access to and control over resources. Take land – those who use it often don’t have security of tenure or food security. Without that, people can easily be displacated by industrial farming interests, like in Brazil with soya production. Governments need to provide security of tenure for smallholder farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples and all others dependent on land for their livelihoods. Where land is sought for any project, in the first instance, the free, prior and informed consent of communities and people who use the land must be obtained.

If consent is given to use land, communities must have a stake in the project, from ownership structures through to the decision making procedures. This should include decisions about sustainable resource use, local content and employment, fair remuneration, the adding of value in situ, and how much is used domestically as opposed to export.

The 2007/08 food price crisis set off a land rush, focused mainly on Africa where deals announced in less than one year totaled some 40 million hectares. As land is finite, many assume availability of fertile land will be the major constraint to future production of food, fuel, and agricultural raw materials.

A World Bank study suggests that, rather than land availability, policies to protect existing rights, allow right holders to make the best use of it, and protect biodiverse areas from being encashed because of the new ‘land rush’ are a more serious constraint. Two findings stand out. First, as no African country with recent surges in investor interest achieves more than 25% of potential yields, there is ample scope to expand output of currently cultivated land by providing smallholder producers with the technology, infrastructure, and incentives needed.

Second, there is enough fertile non-cultivated, non-protected, and sparsely populated land to satisfy demand for decades to come.

In many cases, neglect of existing rights and a lack of environmental and social safeguards caused irreversible damage. To avoid this, countries need to carefully assess their agricultural endowment, identifying ways to improve property rights and find ways to provide technology and infrastructure to allow an optimum balance between closing existing yield gaps and area expansion.

Moving ahead, governments and investors should adhere to seven principles (i) respecting land and resource rights; (ii) ensuring food security; (iii) ensuring transparency, good governance, and an enabling environment; (iv) consultation and participation; (v) economic viability and responsible agro-investing; (vi) social sustainability; and (vii) environmental sustainability.

The challenge now is to replicate the good examples and avoid repeating the many mistakes of the past. To do so, we need to ensure food security and the planning system. Now it seems that we think of little else if we care about the environment. In truth, if we are to manage the many conflicting demands for land in a crowded country, we will need to plan, however old fashioned such an idea might seem.

A charity such as CPRE – which receives much of its support because of people’s concern that every change to the countryside has ‘ugliﬁed it or destroyed its meaning, or both’, in W.G. Hoskirk’s words – has to whisper it, but many changes to land use in the last thirty years have been beneﬁcial for both people and nature.

The most important pressure on land is the need for food security. To ensure food security and the long-term health of our land must be managed better, balancing the need to protect nature with growing our economy. This is an economic value to nature. We are facing the loss of species and habitat at record rates and this needs to be addressed.

Sir John Lawton recently provided a report, ‘Making Space for Nature’, which suggests that climate change could have one of the biggest impacts on land, affecting England’s wildlife and habitats. We are looking at ways to enhance the role of farming in managing land to deliver ecological beneﬁts and strengthen our network of wildlife sites.

Sustainable food production and supporting British farming are priorities for Defra, but this cannot be done at the expense of the natural environment. Agri-environment schemes have a key role to play and it’s important that farmers select the best option for their area. Advice and support to farmers is available through Natural England or the Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

We are committed to reducing the loss of species and habitats while supporting our farming industry. Our plan for achieving this will be set out in the Natural Environment White Paper next year.

Our land provides us with vital natural resources such as clean water to drink and food to eat, protects us from ﬂooding, stores carbon and provides green spaces. Land today faces a mixture of pressures, from a population in the UK that is expected to grow to over 70 million by 2031, increasing the need to grow more food and build more homes, to the damaging effects of climate change. All of these challenges mean our land must be managed better, balancing the need to protect nature with growing our economy. This is not an either/or scenario – there is an economic value to nature. We are facing the loss of species and habitat at record rates and this needs to be addressed.

Before I joined CPRE, I let whole days go by without giving any thought to the planning system. Now it sometimes seems that I think of little else if we care about the environment. In truth, if we are to manage the many conflicting demands for land in a crowded country, we will need to plan, however old fashioned such an idea might seem.

The challenge now is to replicate the good examples and avoid repeating the many mistakes of the past. To do so, we need to ensure food security and the planning system. Now it seems that we think of little else if we care about the environment. In truth, if we are to manage the many conflicting demands for land in a crowded country, we will need to plan, however old fashioned such an idea might seem.
The big question

Jeremy Iles is Chief Executive at The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, an organisation which supports, represents and promotes community-managed farms and gardens across the UK.

UK LAND USE AND REFORM

UK land use

A waste of space?

Land is a resource that has been argued and fought over throughout history, probably for as long as human beings have walked on it. Yet the demands we make upon it are increasing, say Professor Philip Lowe and Ann Liddon.

In the UK, World War II was a defining moment in our attitudes to land and food production. Long before the vogue for guerrilla gardening, roadside verges sprouted crops. Flower gardens were turned over to vegetables, and health and downland ploughed in order to feed the population. Costs and efficiency were secondary considerations and the supply of human labour was seen as the only limiting factor.

This set the scene for post-war productivity – the economically efficient expansion of food and timber. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the focus was on boosting the productivity of land and labour through mechanisation, intensification and specialisation. There was little concern about whether the most effective use was being made of natural resources such as water or soils. Moreover, raising productivity relied heavily on cheap energy from fossil fuel. Farming turned from being a net generator of energy to a net consumer.

Global food supplies expanded enormously, eclipsing fears of food shortage in the UK, but the imperative to expand domestic production was boosted by the extension of the Common Agricultural Policy to the UK, when it joined the European Community (later the EU) in 1973. In the 1980s the resulting ‘better mountains’ and ‘wine lakes’ were dumped on world markets and there was growing disquiet and scandal over costs, waste and trade tensions. Agricultural policy makers were obliged in the mid-1980s to take what at the time seemed the extreme step of introducing measures to limit farm output, including milk quotas and the compulsory idling of land through arable set-aside.

The time was ripe for other claims on rural land to prevail and environmentalists could at last make their case heard. Dedicated schemes introduced in the mid-1980s targeted geographical areas with the aim of protecting valued habitats and landscapes.

A complex system of regulations and rewards emerged through the 1990s to safeguard and promote what were given incentives to maintain biodiversity, landscapes and access to the countryside, and to protect water resources. Care for the environment was seen as another potential source of product differentiation that could be realised through ‘green marketing’. Consumers could express their environmental concerns through discretionary food purchases, with initiatives such as ‘Eat the View’.

Where does this leave us today? Over the past couple of years, volatility in commodity prices has led to increasing concerns about food security, and the farming lobby often takes this as a call to increase production. But the UK is already 75% self-sufficient, a higher figure than in the 1950s, and, in an increasingly globalized world, the pursuit of self-sufficiency for its own sake is no longer regarded as necessary or desirable. Yet, undoubtedly, the global population is growing and, in an era of climate change, the UK may be called upon to play a major part in providing food.

Is there an argument for returning to production at any cost? Many farmers, and some scientists, think that the balance has been tipped too sedulously towards environmental sustainability and away from food production. Environmentalists, however, fear that this risks forfeiting the improvements to the countryside that they have seen over the past decades. Boosting food production is possible, but it must be done in ways that respect environmental limits and minimise damaging trade-offs with other ecosystems if system functionality is to be maintained.

Multifunctional agriculture, which in the past relied on farmers tolerating, or being paid to maintain, sub-optimal production, must now emphasise both ecological and economic efficiency – what we might term ‘smart production’. One means of promoting this is the ‘ecosystem services’ framework, which provides a new way of thinking and working, a move away from looking at natural environment policies in separate ‘silos’ – for example air, water, soil, wildlife – and towards a more holistic or integrated approach based on whole ecosystems.

This ecosystem approach requires a distinct mindset – one which will be new to many of those concerned with the use of land. Can farmers, used to seeing themselves as ‘food producers’, countenance becoming ‘integrated land managers’ who provide ecosystem services? The ecosystem approach means accepting the possibility that, regardless of its current main use or uses, any area of land has the potential to deliver a very wide range of services, such as food, flood management, biodiversity or recreation.

The challenge lies in enabling the pattern of land use to change, to create a landscape which provides this wider range of ecosystem services. Shifts in attitudes required pose challenges for some long-standing policy concepts and

The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG) represents the growing movement of community groups in the UK, which are driving increased demand for land to cultivate.

There has been a surge in take-up of existing statutory allotments, at a time when cuts to local authority services and the shrinking nature of that management of allotment sites is likely to be devolved to community committees.

As a result, new approaches and innovative solutions are needed. Local authorities and community groups will need support and training in making these dramatic changes and find a way forward which meshes with the Government’s Big Society agenda.

Research by FCFCG into a ‘Community Land Bank’ has clearly identified that community groups require land for a wide variety of purposes, including:

• Food growing
• Therapeutic farming
• Play areas
• Wildlife sites
• Informal pocket parks.

The research also suggests that facilitation is key, taking away the risk-averse and confrontational nature of land negotiations. Some local authorities and other land owners in the research areas are willing to start this process if safeguards are in place.

Low-level investment in new projects would be beneficial, especially if working on a new ‘social enterprise model’ with members of the community contributing rent or share capital in return for use of land.

FCFCG suggests instigating ‘vanguard’ projects, or a Community Land Bank national demonstration model, to move this into the next phase. The Federation is at the forefront of this thinking – we’ve got the links to community groups, we are increasingly able to ‘hand hold’ local authorities, and we’ve got models that work.
UK LAND USE AND REFORM

“How we use land is central to both mitigation and adaptation”

By Mark Connell

To identify the potential for land to deliver different ecosystem services to society means stepping back from current or recent land use and considering what range of services could realistically be delivered, given appropriate management.

Determining priorities for any one area – which services should actually be delivered there to meet society’s needs – is quite another matter. Any such decision is the sum of interactions between the market, land managers and policymakers. The decisions can often be contested. Complications arise because priorities will alter over time, in response to new pressures. Priorities agreed today may be far from appropriate in 2020, 2050 or 2100.

The challenge of reconciling public and commercial interests, short-term considerations and long-term requirements, and local and global concerns, is underlined by the imperative to respond to climate change.

The science and politics of climate change have so far focused on mitigation. Increasingly, however, the focus is expanding to include the steps needed to adjust our economy and society to unavoidable changes in climate and their consequences. Both demand that we learn to manage under conditions of uncertainty.

How we use land is central to both mitigation and adaptation. On the one hand, land is both a source of emissions and a means for decreasing them. Land can produce low-carbon energy – from windfarms, solar power, biomass crops and anaerobic digestion of waste. Equally, forests and peatlands have potential to ‘lock up’ substantial amounts of carbon.

On the other hand, land is central to our capacity to adapt and adjust to the effects of climate change. Flood management areas, changing cropping zones and shifts in the geographical ranges of species are examples of this. Much of the medium-term growth in greenhouse gas emissions is already in the pipeline, so adaptation is a necessity. But we have to ensure that short-term adaptation does not add to long-term problems.

Agriculture is responsible for 7% of UK greenhouse gases. There are steps that can help to reduce this – reducing direct and indirect energy use, replacing fossil fuels with biomass and anaerobic digestion; using cultivation methods that increase carbon storage in soils; reducing methane emissions from animals by altering diets and improving manure storage and developing renewable feedstocks and products to substitute for those derived from fossil fuels.

Land managers are already being encouraged to pay greater attention to carbon accounting through voluntary initiatives. Agriculture will also have to adapt to climate change and its consequences, including more extreme weather events. Shifts in growing seasons and water availability, new pests and diseases all pose challenges. There will also be changes in the geography of crops, with new opportunities as well as losses.

Of course, wildlife has no option: it must adapt or perish, and adapt not only to the direct effects of climate change, but also to the indirect effects from human reactions to climate change.

New strategies will be needed to enable specialised species, in particular those that are relatively immobile, to disperse and establish in new locations.

But there are dangers in rushing to address any one problem. An instructive case of a damaging clash between short- and long-term objectives is provided by biofuels. Replacing fossil fuels with renewable biofuels would seem, in principle, to offer benefits in mitigating climate change, yet ‘first generation’ biofuels (grains, vegetable oils) have diverted resources from food production, forcing up food commodity prices while consuming considerable amounts of fossil fuel in their production. Second generation biofuels (that is, dedicated energy crops or waste by-products) may offer a more attractive prospect.

There are thus multiple demands on land from different sources and directions. How can we guide these demands effectively in ways that are both flexible, to allow people and businesses to adjust to environmental change, and strategic, to ensure that the long-term public good is pursued? Any approach has to recognise the full ecological capacities of land and the ecosystem services it provides, to promote initiatives such as precision farming and establish mechanisms that facilitate flexible local responses for landscape-level action.

Finally, it is important to develop a long-term strategic vision for land use which integrates diverse objectives for ecosystem services. Boosting production in a sustainable fashion involves careful trade-offs with other ecosystem services.

Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy seems likely to play a major role. Land managers need to be involved in the process and to engage much more with local communities. Perhaps a charter of rights and responsibilities could support such an approach within the ‘Big Society’ agenda.


Further information is also available on the Relu website www.relu.ac.uk
There are about 17.5 million hectares of farmland in the UK, an area which has remained virtually unchanged for the last 25 years. In addition to this there is an extra 1.2 million hectares of “common rough grazing” giving a total agricultural area of just under 19 million hectares. This land area supports 6.2 million hectares of arable cropping, 32 million sheep, ten million cattle and almost five million pigs. Carl Atkin charts recent developments in this landscape.

Cereals, such as wheat, barley and oilseeds make up almost 80% of the arable land; other arable crops, such as proteins and sugar beet make up 13%, horticulture (fruit, vegetables and ornamentals) make up 4% while potatoe makes up 3% of the land. The UK is the fourth largest producer of cereals and oilseed crops in the EU, accounting for around 8% of total EU production. Wheat, barley and oilseed rape are the most important combinable crops grown in the UK.

According to DEFRA statistics, there are about 300,000 active farmers in the UK with an average unit size of 57 ha – almost three times the EU average of 20 ha. Yet this figure is highly misleading as 41,000 farms are greater than 100 ha of land and account for over 65% of the productive area. There’s also the problem of dealing with ‘statistical farmers’ who are not food production decision makers but may hold a small area of land for amenity or recreational purposes.

Despite popular opinion the industry is still a reasonable player when it comes to employment – in 2009 almost 353,000 people worked on agricultural holdings, a slight increase on the previous year. This breaks down into 152,000 full time farmers, 198,000 part time farmers and 184,000 farm workers. In 2008 the value of UK agriculture to the UK economy was about £6.8 billion.

The distribution of farming systems is principally driven by the underlying agroecology – soils and climate in common parlance – which tends to favour arable farming and horticulture to the south east and pastoral farming to the north and west. Dairy farming in East Anglia can boast. However parts of the livestock sector have always struggled to compete with lower cost producers in Latin America and Asia, and depend on production linked support to show positive margins.

Land ownership trends have also stayed surprisingly static. About 90% of the agricultural land in the UK is privately owned, 56% of this is owner occupied and 34% tenant. There has, however, been a dramatic shift in the tenant sector away from traditional secure tenancies under the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 to shorter, more flexible tenancies which were introduced in the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995.

The remaining 10% of farmland is owned by public bodies, semi public bodies and institutions. The largest public owner is central government (privincipally via the Forestry Commission and Ministry of Defence) who control about 2.6% of the UK farmland area. The next major owners are local authorities (2.1%), water authorities and similar bodies (1.3%), the Crown (0.9%), conservation bodies such as the National Trust and RSPB (0.7%) and the balance of 2.1% is held by Universities and religious institutions (principally Oxbridge colleges and the Church).

Current trends

There has been increasing specialisation of production activity. Specialist enterprises such as dairying and root crop production in particular have become concentrated in the hands of significantly fewer producers over the last two decades – in the case of potatoes more than half. Specialisation has also tended to drive increased efficiency - over the last decade alone the average milk yield per cow has risen from under 6,000 litres per cow to over 7,000 litres per cow.

There continues to be an increasing divergence of land ownership, occupation and operation - the volume of land traded (freethold and leasehold) continues to decline, principally as a result of the favourable income and capital taxation treatment of owning and occupying farmland. Flexible models, such as share farming, contract farming and joint ventures have become more commonplace, allowing land owners and occupiers to retain the fiscal benefits of farming whilst delegating operational matters. This often means that many large farming businesses may undertake the operational decision making on half a dozen or more different ‘statistical farms’ skewing the statistics still further between ‘farmers’ and ‘operators.’

Policy as a driver of agricultural land use has diminished – the substantial reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 2003 finally broke the link between production and support payments. Prior to this, different crops and livestock production systems attracted varying area based payments. Since 2005, all support has been bundled into the ‘single farm payment’, a decoupled support payment paid regardless of production output and paid for adherence to baseline environmental management standards. To give an example of the distorting effects of the old policy: at its peak in 2000, almost 800,000 ha of UK farmland were in compulsory set-aside under the old CAP regime, the figure is now zero as the policy was finally abolished in 2008. Intervention in agricultural markets has diminished substantially, with the virtual dismantling of the old intervention system which created the politically embarrassing grain mountains and wine lakes of the 1980s. This has had a positive effect in making production agriculture more market-focused, but has exposed individual farm businesses to great volatility and they need to adopt more robust risk management and marketing strategies more than ever.

Balancing the needs of food production and the environment has become more important. Agri-environment schemes first came into being in the late 1980s, but there has been a surge in uptake over the last decade with the introduction of ‘entry level stewardship’ in 2005 encouraging all farmers to manage small areas of land for environmental goods and a new industry backed initiative in 2009 called the ‘Campaign for the Farmed Environment’ to retain the environmental benefits lost through the abolition of compulsory set-aside.

Land Prices in the UK have risen substantially over the last decade. Land in the UK, along with Germany, is some of the most expensive farmland in Europe. Only Ireland and Scandinavia have better land use policy debate – specifically how we manage the interplay of food production, delivery of environmental services (and other public goods) and climate change mitigation will become more important. With some of the most productive farmland in the world many may argue we have a moral obligation to use it to its full productive capability, and measuring calories produced per ha of land and litre of water would be one obvious metric. Yet this does not take into account the environmental goods which the market does not yet fully pay for. The major driver of land use choices need to be factored into the national and international debate on farmland use.

Carl Atkin is Head of Research at Bidwells Agriculture.
The ‘rationalisation’ of agriculture that took place in Britain in the second half of the 20th Century is radical and far-reaching. Ruth West, Tom Curtis and Colin Tudge ask whether the situation is coming full circle.

These changes saw an increase in the size of farm holdings, the application of large-scale capital-intensive technologies, a move from mixed farms to specialisation – meaning monoculture – and a growth in bulk institutional buying with often draconian terms and conditions. This resulted in the production of industrial quantities of food for an increasingly urban population. It was based on a model that required industrial style top-down planning, ‘vertical integration’, subsidies, inputs, equipment, and perhaps most notably, industrial levels of fossil fuels.

‘Farming today is designed primarily to be maximally profitable – and indeed more profitable than anything else, so as to compete. Farms that are maximally profitable in the present economy are as big and simple as possible – monocultural – partly to minimise labour (the agrarian workforce has been cut to the bone – the average age of farmers is around 60). Fertility is based on fossil fuels because fossil fuels are relatively cheap.’

Farming based on Biology

To keep the food system going in the long-term, we need agriculture that is productive (to feed 9.5 billion by 2050), sustainable (numbers seem likely to fall eventually; but not for some decades or centuries), and resilient (able to withstand the changes in conditions that we know are coming). Instead, farming today is designed primarily to be maximally profitable – and indeed more profitable than anything else, so as to compete. Farms that are maximally profitable in the present economy are as big and simple as possible – monocultural – partly to minimise labour (the agrarian workforce has been cut to the bone – the average age of farmers is around 60). Fertility is based on fossil fuels because fossil fuels are relatively cheap.

The problem is that this results in an industrial agriculture operating as it can to transcend biological realities. In reality the sharp focus on short-term profit is reliant on taking capital from the future: soils, water, energy, fertility, and soil skills.

Common sense and basic biology tell us that the solution might best be found by using resources in a manner compatible with nature, (albeit always with significant inputs from elsewhere – for example from flooding rivers), and above all, it recycles. Every creature’s waste is somebody else’s provender.

In farming, diversity means a greater range of crops and livestock. The length of a country for people to grow veg on other people’s land.

‘Incredible Edible Todmorden’ is one of several communities that are leading the way in creating edible neighbourhoods. These are critical steps. But if we’re serious about changing the food system, we can’t stop at the city limits. ‘The next step, at farm scale, is refashioned by ‘Future Farms’, in Martin, Hampshire who have formed a co-operative to produce as much of their daily diet as possible from fields and barns within their parish boundary. The group started by providing a means of diversification for farmers, and now runs its own small farm. Other, less rural groups have forged links to the land through collective investment – Cooperatives in Agricultural Ventures. Others still work through strategic buying policies, such as ‘Growing Communities’ in London, which structures its procurement into ‘Food Zones’, working concentrically outwards from the city.

Access to land

In all cases, more farms mean more farms on land which is already owned. In Britain, around 5,000 families own half of Britain’s land. The rest is mostly carved up between very small institutions, from pension funds to Oxford colleges. There is a huge discrepancy between the units of land ownership, and the units of production needed to feed us all well and sustainably. At current rates – less than one half of one percent of farmland put up for sale per year – we would need a century or more to make an impression on this through change of ownership.

We may reasonably feel that sooner or later, Britain needs massive land reform. Indeed so: yet this is not the sine qua non of the most immediate task. Many landowners are very well informed and responsible, and it would be hard to improve on their stewardship. However, in any case, land ownership is so crucial to the system that it’s cracked up to be. Land in Britain these days like everything else has become a commodity; it’s price hiked as high as the market will stand, which in turn has driven some of the most ‘vaccant system components’ that one can then look to fill with new enterprises.

Of course, Land Partnerships are not a new thing. There are between ten and fifteen thousand tenant farmers in Britain, farming around one third of our agricultural land. ‘Inclusion Acts’ (sic) much of Britain was covered by common usufruct arrangements, where property and usage rights were exercised separately, by different people on the same piece of land. Such rights included, for instance: pasture – grazing cattle, goose, sheep, pannage – allowing pigs to forage acorns and other tree mast; and estovers – for gathering firewood.

The opportunity now is to build on this heritage, developing a new wave of Land Partnerships based on mutually beneficial arrangements between landowners and farmers. The promise of Land Partnerships lies in the benefits it brings to all parties. We provide the landowner with a management contract, or lease, for landholding, whilst at the same time avoiding many of the risks and liabilities associated with establishing a clutch of new businesses in-house. For new entrants into farming, partnership arrangements can provide a way around the high costs and intrusiveness of land market transactions.

From a wider perspective, a well-planned cluster of land enterprises has the potential to manage natural resources more efficiently, and increased emphasis on localisation that we will all need if we are to cope with future uncertainty in our food system.
UK LAND USE AND REFORM

Local food production
Access to land the key ingredient

Simon Fairlie calls on county councils to stop hindering local food production, and start helping.

Local food production, often by small scale farmers, does not benefit from economies of scale, but becomes viable through economies of distribution. Small volumes of each commodity are required and transported over short distances to feed a relatively small population. Waste and nutrients accumulate in relatively small quantities, and require little effort to return them the short distance to the land whence they came.

In 2006, I was one of a group of local campaigners who squatted Balham Hill Farm, a county farm with Grade 1 land which Somerset County Council was selling off on the grounds that it was ‘uneconomic’. The figures showed that two thirds of the 90 acre farm was probably loss-making. But the other third provided food – fresh milk, eggs, pork, beef, potatoes, fruit – for a farm shop close to the village of Chiselborough which was highly profitable.

Our analysis showed that the shop was supplying the locality with a wide range of fresh food sufficient for about 300 people. Only about a third was produced on the farm; the rest (vegetables, fruit, lamb, cheese, honey, cider and more) was bought in from nearby farms. In our report presented to the county council we proposed that by scrapping the unprofitable large-scale dairy and focusing producing a full range of fresh local foods to sell through the shop, the land could support three families, rather than one, with a corresponding increase in rent for the council.

The Lib Dem dominated council didn’t listen. They insisted that the farm was too small to be viable, while we argued that 90 acres was too big for one family providing local food at retail prices. The farm was divided up and auctioned off. The farm bungalow, yard and 15 acres had a guide price of £350,000 but sold for over £400,000 – well above the agricultural rental value and considerably more than someone making a living from farming could afford. The new owners held it for a year, letting the docks and thrills grow, then put it on the market again at an asking price of £550,000. Now it is a houseprice establishment.

The percentage of the profits (around £50,000) the County Council pledged to put towards local food? Spent on a feasibility study to establish a “local food centre” at Barrington Court, a nearby National Trust property – which eventually concluded that the project wasn’t feasible.

County farms are the agricultural equivalent of council houses. Mostly created between the two World Wars, under the aegis of the 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act, they were designed to provide affordable smallholding opportunities for landless agricultural workers and soldiers returning from the war. Now nearly a century later, there is a revival in demand for smallholdings from people wanting to make a living from the production and sale of local foods, but most county councils are blind to the opportunity that this presents.

Some, such as Oxfordshire, have already sold off all their holdings, while others, such as Somerset (now under Tory control) and Buckinghamshire, are intent on getting rid of theirs to pay off their debts. Even those counties that maintain their estates now focus mainly on awkwardly middle sized farms of around 300 acres – too large for intensive local food production and processing, too small to thrive on the tiny profit margins that large scale industrial farms have to work to. Since 1990, England’s county farms estate has declined from 550,000 acres to not much over 200,000 acres.

Since county smallholdings are now more or less inaccessible to smallholders, most people wanting to start a local food enterprise are forced to acquire land on the open market. This is by no means impossible, but new entrants are likely to encounter a number of obstacles, mostly connected either with the high price of land, or with the difficulty of getting planning permission.

There is an interesting passage in the ‘Wealth of Nations’ where Adam Smith observes that the price of agricultural land normally fluctuates between about 10 times its annual rental value and 30 times, rising in price when bank interest rates decline, and vice versa. In other words it would take between 30 and 30 years to pay it off through normal agricultural activity.

Currently the rental value of decent pasture land is around £80 per acre, whereas the price is at least £5,500 per acre, and up to £10,000 for a small acreage. In other words the cost of land is now between 60 and 120 times its agricultural rental value, unaffordable for anyone trying to buy it on a conventional farming income. One reason for this perverse situation is that the price of small plots of land is dictated by wealthy people who require it for amenity activities, notably horseyculture.

There are a number of ways around this obstacle. Prospective smallholders may have sufficient capital to meet this expense, for example by selling a house in London, or through a legacy. They may have a second income which subsidizes their agriculture. Or they may convert pasture to some form of intensive agriculture, such as horticulture, which requires relatively little land to produce a given income. As noted, it’s currently better to rent, provided the tenant can obtain an agreement that provides sufficient security.

Increasingly, and somewhat curiously, one of the main sources of rental land for pioneering smallholders seems to be the large estates of the landed gentry who for centuries made land so inaccessible to the peasantry. My own hunch is that over the last fifteen years, a good many of these estates have been inherited by gentlemen of my generation; that is to say they reached adulthood around 1968 and imbibed (or perhaps I should say inhaled) the same alternative ethos that lies at the root of the organic and local food movement. Large sheepfolds of rural England are now owned by a generation of second rank Prince Charles’s, who are refreshingly open to innovative green proposals.

The other, and probably greater obstacle is planning permission. It is virtually impossible to operate a complex mixed smallholding whilst living off site, particularly with children to look after, and in any case it is usually impossible to make it pay enough to afford a house in the nearest village. For the last 5-8 years, as director of Chapter 7, I have been dealing with this issue, advising smallholders how to apply for permission and how to go to appeal when (nine times out of 10) they are refused.

In our experience at Chapter 7, most smallholders meet obdurate opposition from the local planning authority, but, if their enterprise is competent and productive, tend to obtain planning approval at appeal. High levels of stress are the hallmark of establishing a new farm, but one can sympathize with the planners who have to distinguish between genuine farmers on the one hand and people who are only putting up a pretence in order to acquire a dwelling in the countryside on the other.

The problem lies in the weak conditions applied to agricultural dwellings, which can be sold off from the land as soon as permission is granted (a loophole which the Welsh Assembly have recently abolished).

Where the planning system is most at fault is not in its development control, but its planning policy. All around the major towns of England lie green belts, areas where by popular demand housing and industrial development is not permitted. These areas are the prime sites for local food operations, small satellite farms supplying food for the metropolis, recycling its organic waste and providing hands on farming experience for urban schoolchildren who are so deprived of contact with nature. Does the government supply policies that enable and encourage local food providers to set up enterprises to tap such a ready and needy market? No, it lets such areas foster under a blighted regime where landowners sit on their land waiting for planning policies to be relaxed while disconsolate nagy nibble between the docks and thistles sprouting under the pylons.

The apathy is similar in the countryside. A few years ago a group of campaigners, operating under the name of ‘Farm Villages’, came up with a proposal to establish a farm shop in every village in Britain. They envisaged farms not unlike our proposal for Balham Hill, which would provide the bulk of the fresh food for 250 or 500 inhabitants in the neighbourhood, and sell it through a farm shop in the village, which might also supply cans of baked beans and packets of Kleenex, or even a post office counter. The shop would support the farm, and the farm would support the shop.

It is such an obvious solution for villages that currently have no facilities and one that could be very easily promoted through policies in the local plan. Does this happen? No it doesn’t. Few planners have any understanding of things agricultural, and councillors of all political persuasions are normally dismissive. “Agriculture is not our core business” the Tory leader of Somerset County Council stated when quizzed about the sale of county farms. Meaning, of course, that access to agricultural land is a matter for the market to decide, or more precisely, the supermarkets.

Simon Fairlie has been agricultural labourer, vine-worker, shepherd, fisherman, builder, stonemason and farmer. He co-edited The Ecologist magazine, runs Chapter 7, which provides planning advice to smallholders, is editor of The Land, sells scythes and writes books.
Who owns the land?
Myths about food and houses

The UK comprises around 60 million acres. Roughly 62 million people live here, with over 50% of us inhabiting less than 5%, or 3 million acres.

Between 4.2 million acres and 6 million acres (a maximum of 10%), is under bricks, mortar and tarmac. Fifteen million acres is waste, bog and moor. The remaining 39 million acres is heavily subsidised rural and agricultural land.

There are about 25 million dwellings in the UK, of which about 17.7 million are private and the remainder are council, housing association or private rented. There is an average of 10 dwellings per acre, and the urban housing footprint is around 2.5 million acres, less than 3% of UK land.

The most valuable land in the UK is urban. It is heavily taxed (around £6,000 per acre), producing around £22bn a year for the exchequer. By contrast, the UK's agricultural land (around £69) receives subsidies of around £3.6bn per year.

That's about £87 back for every acre.

Food and land are commodities that are essential to survival, yet subject to market forces. In a world where nature produces scarcity and surplus in unpredictable (and unregulated) circumstances, how do we ensure that the market is ‘reasonably’ in other words, how to make the market pay a decent return for the producer or owner of the commodity, and a fair price for the buyer?

Part of the answer is reliable information about the availability of the commodity, and ready access to that information by buyers and sellers. However, reliable information about land in the UK is not readily available.

A few facts
In financial terms, the housing market (the essential commodity of shelter), at the peak of the boom in 2007, was the biggest single market in the UK in financial terms. It provided jobs, money for banks and mortgage companies, and (occasionally) satisfaction for the buyers. But it was a sellers’ market based on the myth of scarce land in the UK.

That myth is sustainable because the key information source on land, the Land Registry, was constructed to conceal, not reveal, information. Here are some statements about the Land Registry in the Government's Land registration Act of 2002:

“Land Registry of the UK do not record ownership of land. That is because there is only one owner of land in the UK, the Crown, in the person of the Queen, Elizabeth II.” The Land Registry records “...an interest in an estate in land, in fee simple”.

It gets more bizarre. The Land Registry, the government tells us, has no idea how much land there is in the UK, as it does not record such information when titles to estates in land are registered.

And that’s without mentioning the Crown’s hidden and rather significant interest. The government summed it up like this:

“The Crown is the only absolute owner of land in England & Wales (and in Scotland and Northern Ireland), all others hold an estate in land. Estates, which derive from feudal terms of tenure, originally took many forms but were reduced by the Law of Property Act 1925 to two, an estate in fee simple, absolute in possession, generally known as ‘freehold’ and an estate for a term of years absolutely generally known as ‘leasehold’.”

Serious issue
When the Land registry for England and Wales was created in 1925 landowners were given 65 years through rolling registration, to be brought within the terms of the Act relating to mandatory registration. That was completed in 1990. But the legal requirement to register related to transactions in estates, and not to actual possession. This left about 50% of the acreage of England and Wales unrecorded in the Land Registry (about the same for Northern Ireland, but less for Scotland).

That situation persists today.

So when we talk about land in the UK our starting point is ignorance, without knowing the key facts. This can create situations like the recent Council for the Postvention of Rural England warning that if we went on building homes at the rate we were doing, England would be concreted over by about 2035.

The media reported it without asking how big England was (32 million acres) how much was urban (10% or 3.2 million acres) and what the current build rate was (14,000 acres a year, and falling).

The estimate of complete concretisation was (14,000 acres a year, and falling). The estimate of complete concretisation by 2035 was out by about 2,285 years.

It is easy to perpetuate this myth when the facts are seldom or ever available, but using the figures that are available, it’s easy to see that there is no threat to rural Britain from the current level of development. There is a threat though, and that’s to the economic well being of Britain’s inhabitants, by a false myth of land scarcity and a Land Registry that cannot tell us who owns the land.

Meat: Three Perspectives

Animals as Biotechnology: Ethics, Sustainability and Critical Animal Studies’ is a sociologist’s view on the increasingly scientific approach to farm animal breeding. Making compelling links between both the consequences of the detached way we treat our animals and also seeing it as symptomatic of a shift in society itself, Richard Twine takes a novel approach. “The Meat Crisis: Developing More Sustainable Production and Consumption” (ed. Joyce D’Silva and John Webster) looks at livestock issues in terms of welfare, environment, health, ethics and policy, drawing on the academic expertise in each field to offer up some tactical solutions to the over-consumption of animals. “Meat: A Benign Exaggeration” is a helpful provocation to environmentalists and the farming industry alike, with Simon Fairlie’s recipe for ‘default livestock’ – where animals eat the leftovers from land management – showing that it is the current system of producing meat that is at issue, not simply the act of consumption. In these three excellent books, Fairlie provides a very personal, experiential argument, D’Silva and Webster provide a number of the most prominent arguments for reducing meat consumption, and Twine takes an innovative approach by questioning why society has reached this point.

Zimbabwe’s Land Reform: Myths and Realities

The result of a 10 year project in Mavingo province in Zimbabwe, this book debunks the myths that Mugabe’s land reforms have been disastrous for his country. Whilst refusing to ignore corruption, malpractice and mistakes, Scoones and colleagues find a resilient and enterprising core of small-scale farmers surviving and even profiting from land reform. LB

Empires of Food: Feast, Famine and the Rise and Fall of Civilisations

Here are fascinating tales of how political and economic power and urbanisation have shaped food throughout history, coupled with a warning that ignorance or neglect of ecological realities can undermine any civilisation, not least ours. And that lesson requires us to rethink the way we feed ourselves now. GT

The Whole Earth Discipline

This is a controversial book that has sparked fierce debate in the green movement and beyond. Here we see Brand, an ‘eco hippy’ argue in favour of some of the most vilified technologies in the history of the environmental movement, including nuclear power and GM technology. Pragmatist or apostle? The jury’s out. LB

Food Policy: Integrating Health, Environment and Society

This book looks at food policy’s ability to integrate three elements: human health, the environment and social relations. Drawing on examples of global, national and personal food worlds, the authors gently tease out from the complex interplay of issues that is food policy, a clear justification for a completely new holistic approach to the governance of the food system. KB

Rebels for the Soil: The Rise of the Global Organic Food and Farming Movement

The popularity and credibility experienced by the organic movement today is the result of decades of work. Reed looks at the various incarnations of the campaigns from the 1920s to its modern day reinvention, giving a fascinating historical context to how a mass movement was built to address pollution, GMO cultivation and market dominance. KB

The Recipe Reader: Narratives, Contexts, Traditions

This collection of essays combines an explorations into the histories of publishing and domesticity, providing a diverse, detailed analysis of recipes from various approaches and contexts. With subject matter ranging from the preservation of cultural values and the use of food writing in fiction to the relationship between food and feminism, there will most likely be something to interest everybody. VED

Food Ethics

With an introduction that seeks to bring classical philosophy to bear on the proceeding articles about global trade, GMO cultivation, water rights and policy, Gottwald et al. delve into the current dialogues within the multitudinous discipline of food ethics. With well-balanced chapters, the reader gains a sound understanding of the contemporary movements in ethics. KB

Kevin Cahill lives in Devon, and is the author of a number of books on food, trade and land ownership including ‘Who Owns Britain’. He was a researcher on the original Sunday Times Rich List.
Robert Palmer, page 7: Footnotes:

1 This is an updated version of an article which first appeared in the Mcvor Newsletter, 52, May 2010


3 See my select bibliography: http://www.socelo.org/socelo/learnhumanasparl/struggle_ethics.html


5 Forthcoming events

6 See www.westminsterforumprojects.co.uk/forums/event.php?eid=187 | London, UK

7 www.gold.ac.uk/anthropology/news-events/eventtitle,20311,en.php | London, UK

8 Forthcoming events

9 www.drought.wcrp-climate.org/workshop | Barcelona, Spain

10 The 2nd - 4th Mar '11 Drought predictability and prediction in a changing climate | World Climate Research Programme

11 See www.gold.ac.uk/anthropology/news-events/eventtitle,20311,en.php | London, UK

12 2nd Feb '11 Food and Health Debate: A Coalition | The Grocer

13 7th Dec '10 ‘Women’, of course, differ from one another in many respects, including


15 “Women and land: marginality and the left-hand power” in S.


17 Bina Agarwal, A Field of One’s Own: women and land rights in South Asia, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994

18 6 Meals per gallon: The impact of industrial biofuels on people and global

19 Destruction (London, Pluto Press, 2010), 89.

20 See e.g. A. Manji “Remortgaging Women’s Lives: the World Bank’s Land

21 Zongmin Li and J. Bruce “Gender, landlessness and equity in China” in P.

22 22 The World March of Women, “A Decade of Feminist Struggle: no dein MST”, 2004 Available at www.scielo.br/bfla/pdf/bfla/.../final


24 6 Meals per gallon: The impact of industrial biofuels on people and global


26 See e.g. A. Manji “Remortgaging Women’s Lives: the World Bank’s Land

27 Zongmin Li and J. Bruce “Gender, landlessness and equity in China” in P.