



# land reform



What do you think about people building their own home, living independently, sustainably, mortgage-free and producing food for themselves and for local people? Do you think that's a good way to live? We think it is.

## The current situation

There has been a massive transfer of people from the countryside to cities. It has meant the loss of small farms and rural skills - replaced by industrial agriculture and corporate jobs that suck money out of communities to pay shareholders. Ordinary people are kept off the land, because so few people own so much of it, and the planning system prevents people from building a home on a few acres and becoming independent.

In Britain, over 70% of the land (and all the farmland) is owned by less than 1% of the population. Millions of small farmers are losing their land in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Oxfam say that 227 million hectares have been appropriated by international investors in the first decade of this century. Large-scale, chemical, mechanised agriculture doesn't produce as much food per hectare and damages ecology - but investors are interested only in maximising rent.

If you want to build a natural home and have a sustainable livelihood in the countryside, you have to be prepared for a battle that can last years, to produce endless reports and to climb a huge learning curve as regards the complexities of the planning system. Meanwhile, industrial agriculture producing food for supermarkets is poisoning and eroding the soil. In 2013, the UN reported that globally, a third of all food produced never gets eaten. This is largely to do with supermarkets' cosmetic standards, sell-by dates, supply chains that are too long and crops abandoned in fields because of fluctuations in global markets. We can only change with a system of small producers supplying local markets.



*Land is the ultimate zero-sum game. If some people have too much, others can't have any. Ted Turner has 2 million acres. We think that's too much.*



*Laird: "You're trespassing on my land",  
Poacher: "Why is it your land?"  
Laird: "Because it was my father's".  
Poacher: "How did he get it?"  
Laird: "He inherited it from his father,  
and so on back to the first Laird"  
Poacher: "And how did he get it?"  
Laird: "He fought for it"  
Poacher: "Well then, I'll fight you for it".*

## History

In England, after 1066, all land was claimed for the crown, with common grazing land for peasants. From the 14th to the 19th century, common land was enclosed as big landowners put fences and hedges around it. There were various revolts (e.g. the Levellers and Diggers) that didn't end well. From the end of the 18th century, peasants were needed to work in the new factories - so they were sucked out of the countryside into slums, most brutally via the Highland Clearances. Meanwhile, colonialism was introducing the private land ownership to many parts of the world that had never known it. In the US, small farmers became sharecroppers in the 19th century, then left the land after the dust bowl of the 1930s, and US farms became truly enormous. Small farmers fared no better in 'communist' countries, with peasants facing brutal repression. In India, the Green Revolution in the 1960s industrialised agriculture and delivered millions of ex-smallholders to urban slums.

In the UK, the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was introduced to prevent the urbanisation of the countryside - a good idea in the main, to stop the 'urban octopus' from spreading over the countryside. Now there is 'development' land, where building is allowed, but it's expensive, and quickly snapped up by big developers; and there is 'open countryside' - much cheaper, but you can't build a home on it. Low-impacters are in a *Catch 22* situation. Either they can afford land that they're not allowed to live on, or they're allowed to live on land that they can't afford.



### Allowing smallholders to build homes

Criteria-based policies could allow people to live on smallholdings in the open countryside - covering size, materials, utilities, land-use, lifestyle, public access and traffic. Permission would be granted to those producing food, rather than to people who've dropped out of the rat race and bought a few acres for limited 'self-sufficiency' or to allow land to revert to wilderness. Not everyone wants to live like this, so food has to be produced for sale. The criteria could also cover woodland - as long as there's a need to live there (people producing charcoal, timber, firewood etc.). There could be provision for people who want to 'downsize' - sell a property and build an eco-house, get a part-time job and grow some food. This could be on the edge of existing settlements - close to facilities but outside the development zone, so affordable. Criteria-based, but without the requirement to farm. Homes could be clustered so resources could be shared, and owned / leased by a land trust or co-op. Associated land could be rented to residents for allotments, animals etc.

Applications could still be refused, so a new land-use class (low-impact land?) could be introduced. Any land could be sold as low-impact land. It would fetch a higher price than open countryside (but much less than development land), and development would be automatically permitted as long as legally-binding criteria are adhered to.

### Incorporated bodies to ensure sustainability

Incorporated bodies such as land trusts / co-ops may be a good idea. Planners need to be sure that low-impact means in perpetuity. They don't want a low-impact development to be a 'Trojan Horse' to allow suburban creep. At the moment, planners can't ensure that buildings won't become high-impact in time. Conditions can be overturned and there can be applications for 'improvements'.

A trust or co-op with an environmental track-record would ensure that criteria are adhered to forever. It's the opposite approach to planning conditions - restrictions on people who, left to their own devices, would do something different. But low-impactors want restrictions, to stop people living in an environmentally-damaging way.

Smallholders could rent from bodies if they have no money, or find it difficult to get a mortgage. Rents could be low but perpetual, so that a fund is built up to buy more land. As long as tenants abide by the criteria, there will be security of tenure.



*Supermarkets, identikit housing estates, motorways, pylons, all fine; self-built, natural homes like this, no. With today's housing shortages, it makes no sense.*

### What's already happening

Lammas community broke new ground by using Wales' One Planet Development policy to obtain permission for 9 homes on 5-acre plots in the open countryside, based on ecological criteria. The Ecological Land Co-op has done the same in England, for 3 homes on 22 acres in Devon. Hockerton Housing Project in Notts was permitted outside the development zone by section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act, due to 'material conditions' - which can include its sustainable nature.

One-planet development (OPD) is new planning guidance in Wales, part of TAN6 (Technical Advice Note 6) which permits developments with a per person eco-footprint of 1.88 hectares (the global average) or below, even in open countryside. Applicants have to provide a plan to show how they will support themselves from the land.

In Scotland, there have been community buyouts from absentee landlords, as on the island of Eigg. The best way to keep up to speed is by subscribing to *the Land* magazine.

### resources

- see [lowimpact.org/land-reform](http://lowimpact.org/land-reform) for more info, links, magazines and books, including:
- Simon Fairlie, *Low-impact Development*
- [thelandmagazine.org.uk](http://thelandmagazine.org.uk) - 'the Land' magazine
- [tlio.org.uk/defining-rural-sustainability-2](http://tlio.org.uk/defining-rural-sustainability-2) - an example of low-impact criteria
- [monbiot.com/2008/06/10/small-is-bountiful](http://monbiot.com/2008/06/10/small-is-bountiful) - small farms produce more food than large ones
- [lammas.org.uk](http://lammas.org.uk) - Lammas, Pembrokeshire
- [ecologicalland.coop](http://ecologicalland.coop) - Ecological Land Co-op

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