



Land for What? 12th -13th November 2016: Full Report of Discussions

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Introduction:

On the weekend of 12th-13th November 2016, hundreds of people with diverse backgrounds and interests gathered to talk about the issues surrounding land, and to look for spaces for solutions. This report summarises some of the sessions from the weekend. Thanks to everyone who submitted a session summary. We hope it can be useful for people who weren't able to make it to the event, and will help inspire further discussions.

We recorded quite a lot of video on the day and are in the process of sifting through and editing it. We also published [a Storify of the day](#), complete with photos and tweets!

We do not have summaries for every session at Land for What, yet for those summaries which are included, we have done our best to capture the diversity of what was discussed. If you have notes from a session you think we could incorporate, please email them to us: landforwhat@gmail.com. Please also visit our [online discussion forum](#) for more information and to continue the discussion.



Session Summaries:

Land, the fundamentals

One of the fundamental aims of Land for What is to increase 'land literacy' in the UK and encourage informed conversations about land. It was only fitting then to incorporate a session entitled "Land, The Fundamentals" led by Kate Swade from Shared Assets and Alice Martin from NEF. It ran twice on the Saturday afternoon to give people a better chance to experience this crucial introduction to land rights and land distribution in this country.

The session presented five key facts about the system of land ownership and control in the UK:

- Land ownership is unequal
- Information on land is hard to get
- Taxes and subsidies prop up the current system
- The housing crisis is a land crisis
- The system is culturally specific

A statistic that lays out the issue perfectly served as a starting for our education: two thirds of land in the UK is owned by less than 1% of the population. Half the land in Scotland is owned by 432 people. Moreover it is still incredibly difficult to get info on **who owns what**. The Land Registry (who manage land ownership registration in England and Wales) only have information for 80% of the land, since landowners are only required to declare ownership if land changes hands.

Taxation and subsidies only increase this inequality as there is a minimum amount of land needed to receive subsidies. Hence, the more land you own, the more help you receive in managing it. Furthermore, investors are drawn into buying woodland and agricultural land as it is exempt from inheritance tax and therefore a safe and lucrative investment.

The concluding discussion centred on the different approaches to land taken by authorities and political figures in Scotland, England and Wales. The Green Party for example have supported a land value tax, Scotland have passed a land reform bill and in Wales, sustainable self-builds on smallholdings are supported by One Planet Development planning policy. The challenges of ending land and property speculation, and hence the housing crisis, are vast. Yet, many mapping projects already exist to identify and report poorly used land, and a movement against empty properties is growing.

Some useful resources from this session:

<http://localselfbuildregister.co.uk/>

www.resources.landforwhat.org.uk

Who Owns Britain by Kevin Cahill

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Food and Farming

This session gathered individuals and groups from a range of food-based businesses, led by Land Workers Alliance and the Community Food Growers Network. Food and Farming created a space in which the struggles that we face, and the ideas that we hold of how to combat them.

Looking at the barriers to expansion in the land-based sector, a lack of skills and a lack of labour were identified as key issues, which eventually result in a lack of access to markets. The way we use and source soil, water and perennial crops also present barriers to making businesses ecological. From an urban lens, the fundamental issue of accessibility to good quality food markets for poor communities underpinned many of the calls for change.

Analysing the potential for change we looked at reforms to the current system and immediately achievable solutions. These include:

- Strategizing a plan on peri-urban land, which was highlighted as a contentious space which often finds housing and farming in competition.
- Communication between urban and rural farmers as to understand each others needs and exchange resources.
- Squatting, occupying abandoned land and building links between central and regional authorities as to enforce policies.

More broadly however, the question of how much we want to reform versus how much current legislation needs overhauling ran as an undercurrent throughout the conversation. The current system of land use and land distribution will require deep changes in order to allow both rural and urban growers to live and work sustainably and sell in markets that deprived communities can access.

Housing and Land

This workshop considered the land issues relating to different sorts of housing campaigns and the role of land reform within this. There were six speakers, each with a particular perspective.

- The speaker from Tower Hamlets Private Renters stressed the importance of maintaining social housing so that there is not so much demand for private rentals driving up rents. Landlords themselves need to be controlled- with rent control and more regulation of their performance, eg repairs, attention to the needs of the renters.
- Noise is a community group in south Ilford that seeks to combat the overdevelopment of the area. The area is seeing the general deterioration as more buy-to-let landlords crowd people into accommodation (beds in sheds) and inappropriate tower blocks are built. Noise is also concerned about the failure to provide suitable facilities for the community. People are losing their sense of belonging.

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- The 'Axe the Housing Act' is a campaign that seeks to get the Act repealed and/or get councils not to implement it. The key issue facing housing in relation to land is the fact that land (and the housing on it) is being transferred to the private sector and we are losing valuable public assets, evident in the decline of social housing. Keeping land and housing within control of the public sector is a key priority.
- St Ann's Redevelopment Trust (StART) is aiming to buy a local site and take control of the redevelopment. They have been organising as a community and with the support of architects have been putting together a plan for the area that includes truly affordable housing as well as incorporating green spaces and focusing on health and well-being.
- The London Co-operative Housing speaker stressed that though it is important to build more social housing and protect what we have, co-operatives are also a key part of any strategy. This means that groups of people get hold of land/homes and manage and own it collectively.

It was evident from this session that housing campaigners focus on different things and have different immediate priorities. For some it is vital to protect the public land and housing we have now, while other prioritised gains of access to land independent of both the public and private sector, eg co-operatives or community land trusts. Some have a focus that is broader than housing altogether: building and maintaining communities with declining capacity and resources.

Food & Housing

The aims of the Food & Housing session were:

1. To create a space where people from the food and housing movements/sectors could meet each other and develop relationships
2. To hear different experiences and perspectives around food and housing
3. To begin discussions on possible areas where housing needs and food needs intersected and how the two sectors/movements could cooperate for future actions

The session began with a summary from the two previous sessions – 'Food & Farming' and 'Housing & Land' so the whole group had a sense of what had been discussed earlier and reflected key discussions in the different areas.

There was a short outline from the St Ann's Redevelopment Trust in Haringey as an example of a community-led housing initiative that incorporated green space and food growing into the design.

The Community Food Growers Network (CFGN) made the example of a policy in their London Plan policy proposal document that would be binding for the 32 London boroughs that: 'Every new housing development should incorporate food growing space.'

It was also noted that in the definition of a 'decent home' created by the Radical Housing Network that 'access to green space' is a feature of this.

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In recent years the Radical Housing Network and CFGN have built relationships through organising the first ever demonstrations against MIPIM- the world's largest property fair – under the banner 'London is Not for Sale!'.

The workshop split into 10 smaller groups of 5 – 6 people to discuss:

1. What are your experiences of food and housing?
2. What are possible areas of collaboration for equitable, just access to food and housing?

As these conversations seemed buzzing and fruitful the facilitators let these run for most of the session. The 10 groups then fed back to the whole group 3 key points from their discussions. These included:

- Costs of food, housing
- Access to info on land ownership
- Small council owned plots: an opportunity for collaboration
- Livelihoods – farming + housing } communal relationship
- Access to land – self build/ allotments } lack of council help
- New developments don't come with community land
- Food deserts - access to housing but not food
- Urban areas: food/housing tension: precarity of housing, living on the land, repopulating the countryside
- Professionalisation - land used by communities, creating careers in a climate of austerity
- Lack of legislation/public policy

Land and Environment Workshop

During this two hour session, six speakers gave different perspectives on land and the environment, followed by smaller group discussions about housing and the environment, balancing human needs for land and the environment, and the kinds of reforms we need to achieve our goals.

The initial key points were:

1. Greening the cities - the importance of making cities green both to give land to other species and to create a better quality of life for humans
2. Climate change and land - how we use land contributes to climate change so we have to find ways of using land differently
3. Open Space - the importance of having green space/wild land for humans
4. Grow Heathrow - an example of taking over a piece of land and showing how it can be used sustainably as well as a protest on how not to use land (airport expansion)
5. Land Workers Alliance - ways of farming that have less of a negative impact on the planet
6. Housing and the environment - impacts of housing on the environment

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The first main topic of discussion was on how housing competes with other demands for land use, and its environmental impacts. The following key points were raised:

- The cement industry is one of the primary producers of carbon dioxide.
- We have enough land for everyone's housing need, but not everyone's housing greed - there are lots of empty or heavily under-occupied (mainly homeowners) homes as well as pressure to release more land for new housing.
- Profiteering from people's housing need may lead to unnecessary environmentally harmful development - both in terms of additional land use that impacts other species, water use, etc, and demolition rather than refurbishment of housing stock.
- Poor housing (which is most likely to be private rented housing) is often not energy efficient, which means its residents either live in fuel poverty or are forced to use more (usually fossil fuel) energy than they would otherwise.
- Gentrification leads to displacement, which can lead to longer commutes for working, studying and connecting with support networks.

The second main question considered was how to satisfy human needs for food, housing and other resources whilst still giving space to other species, dealing with climate change and other environmental problems. The following ideas were discussed by groups:

- The need for a whole systems approach where we see more integrated land use.
- The problem of growth-based economy
- The need to get rid of land use which leads to climate change, eg airports
- That solutions for agriculture are only appropriate for small land holdings.
- That different diets, eg vegetarianism would release more land
- To mix conservation with productive agriculture
- The concept of eco-modernism- need to accelerate the growth of cities and technology so as to leave the land to rewild. Debate about this- what about the environmental impact of hi-tech solutions?
- Can capitalism accommodate climate change? Can you change land use without changing the whole system?
- Should we aim for more self-sufficiency?

Groups also discussed what kind of land reforms we might need in order to achieve our goals. The following points were raised:

- The profit motive needs to be destroyed and there needs to be land redistribution
- We need to change transport systems, reduce dependence on the car/plane
- We need devolution of decision-making with the planning system more under control of the local communities. Re-localisation.
- Some top-down measures will also be needed, eg reform of subsidies
- We need to address the psychology of how agriculture equates to civilisation
- We need to build alternatives, eg ecosystem restoration camps
- We need to stop land being a financial asset

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Public and Community Space

Led by Richard Lee of Just Space this session focused on how councils and local governments are approaching the management of parks and community spaces as budgets are being cut. Dave Morris from the National Association of Parks and Green Spaces - the national body for Friends Groups - outlined the response of communities and led discussions on the positive examples of people taking control in their local areas.

Kate Swade of Shared Assets outlined the approach that councils are taking to managing green spaces when budgets are being cut. There is a theme across the board of needing to cut costs (in some positive ways, such as creating wildflower meadows rather than cutting grass), and increasing income, for example through cafes and events in parks. However we are also seeing councils looking to sell or transfer parks, creating new management organisations like trusts, reorganizing their internal teams and looking to the community to take more responsibility.

Much of where this leaves us is tied into the changing relationship between councils and communities. We no longer simply pay council taxes and receive a service, and councils are under pressure to be more “business like”. A question for all of us is about how we approach this new dynamic, whether by partnering with local authorities, volunteering for the council or campaigning for increased funding for statutory services.

Innovative ideas of how to use commons for community development included community ownership, and hence community decision making, using parks for food growing and partnering with local schools to engage young people in new projects. Securing long-term funding is nonetheless crucial as there is a strong sentiment that parks shouldn't be for profit and therefore shouldn't be used as spaces simply for advertising. The example of Bologna was heralded as a place where the city council takes a commons-based approach to the land. Perhaps in time this is something we too will be able to do.

Access to Land and Sustainable Models of Energy Provision

Emilia Melville of the Bristol Energy Cooperative and Holly Tomlinson explored the relationship between energy production and land use/ownership.

This began by looking at the historic rights to resources for energy in England, which have been lost over the last thousand years and the current neo-colonial system of resource consumption. Next the current land area per person demanded by current energy production was explored and alternatives considered, including possibilities that new models of ownership could offer.

Participants reflected on the destructive effects on the hunt for and dependence on energy from colonialism to the Iraq War to neo-colonialism in Nigeria where 80% of the population

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has no access to energy in a country that produces (for exportation) 5 times as much energy as it needs.

Depending on our level of access to land, we have the ability to push new and sustainable models. From community ownership of land which uses wind farms for production to the use of rooftops for solar panels, there are a number of methods which could localise and make our energy consumption far more sustainable. If we can't own land through joint ventures or shared ownership, there are also local councils who own land who can be pressured to invest in using that land for sustainable energy. Land reform and increasing access to land for people and their communities would be a huge step towards sustainable energy production, where it serves and is controlled by communities.

There was discussion about where solar panels should be best situated, in rural settings as part of solar farms, or utilising existing south facing roofs.

Emilia's full report can be found here -

<https://emiliamelvilleengd.wordpress.com/2016/11/14/energy-and-land/>

Working with People of Colour and Other Marginalised Groups in Land Activism

In the UK in 2016, we find ourselves a part of a diverse population who are all affected by the issues that are born of unequal land distribution to different degrees and with different experiences. In our movements, by centring the voices of the most marginalised we are able to create more progressive visions for our society and a more egalitarian and harmonious structure for the groups we work within to realise those visions.

This session led by Dee Woods of London Community Neighbourhood Cooperative and Zahra Dalilah of Take Back The City, aimed to explore exactly how we can make that happen to ensure that land movements are constructed in a way that supports and facilitates an intersectional approach and the inclusion of as many people as possible.

Kicking off the discussion, we shared theories as to why food growing spaces, activist spaces and even conferences about land often lack diversity. The pragmatics revealed a picture of people who lack the time or confidence to participate in self-organising groups. Another consideration was that for people of colour and other over-policed communities, disobedience costs are heavy and self-preservation is crucial. That said, looking at community and anti-racist organising, there is evidence that people of colour have been and are a part of radical organisations who have had huge impacts on changing the fabric of society.

So how do we make our spaces more inclusive as to foster an intersectional movement? One crucial point that arose from the conversation is that we need to talk about privilege. Race is still very much a taboo topic in this country and we need to embrace those feelings

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of discomfort as we begin to unpick how we benefit from systems of oppression and relinquish our power as to spread it more evenly. Using diverse methods of participation, targeting outreach and engagement, centring the voices and not just presenting the faces of people of colour and other marginalised groups were all heralded as steps in the right direction.

What Would a Westminster Land Reform Act Look Like?

The Sunday afternoon was spent getting into the nitty gritty of what needs to be done to achieve Land Reform in England. This session featuring Marion Shoard and Andy Wightman, and chaired by Tom Kenny of Shared Assets, looked into the pragmatic ways that we can begin to design a land reform bill to be passed in Westminster. We have a recording of this session which we hope to be able to share soon, since there is a lot of good detail in it. Much of the session covered specific reforms that could be pursued. These included tax reforms, developing a comprehensive register of who owns land, and much more.

Looking at historic examples, the session explored Labour's attempt in 1997 to put the issue of land back on the table by promising a land reform which never came to fruition. Scotland nonetheless took hold of this, devolving from the processes in Westminster. Despite initial judgments that land reform was a marginal issue that didn't affect urban areas, a new private renters legal framework emerged in the next 17 years. This meant land reform for Scotland.

Looking at doing the same in England, discussions transpired positing that legislative and policy change is one thing but exposing land distribution and ownership as an issue in this country is equally important. Demands for a proper Land Registry rang through this session too, highlighting that transparency must be central to land reform in the UK.

This session was certainly amongst the most vibrant and plans were set in motion to build a land reform bill that removes various tax exemptions, ends the right to buy and reforms compulsory purchase law. This, it was said, could be drafted for presentation by 2020.

Post-Brexit Agricultural Policy

With insights from Simon Fairlie of The Land Magazine, Dee Butterly from the Land Workers' Alliance and the Small Farm Future blog, this session aimed to analyse how policy change post-Brexit will affect farmers and food growers in the long term.

Outlining the situation, it was highlighted that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) 25 year plan was due to be released with the Autumn statement, the contents of which are as yet unknown. Until then we know that Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies will remain in place until at least 2020.

The question was soon raised as to what potential exists for positive change after EU agricultural policy no longer applies. Here, we have an opportunity to move away from the

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policies and practice laid out by the CAP, which essentially rewards land ownership rather than farming. Simon Fairlie raised the point that whether or not agriculture should be more sustainable has never been the question: how we can or should make it so is a more contentious issue.

Alternatives that were presented included the idea of 'land sparing' which posits that we should intensify agriculture on less, better land, and conserve the rest. This would however, would depend on huge increases in yields, and does nothing to address the problem of soil degradation in intensive farming.

'Land sharing' was also presented as an alternative i.e. fairer land distribution, more farming, and more environmentally friendly farming. Barriers to this would be that it relies on tariffs on imported food and a reduction in meat consumption but environmental practices could also be incentivised through a tax on poor practice.

Closing the conversation Dee Butterly put forward a powerful demand for a national food policy. Drawing on the example of Canada she highlighted the need to break out of the system in which policy and decision making on trade, agriculture, health, labour, and the environment are made in isolation and food is not necessarily the centre of those conversations.

Why We Need to Know Who Owns Our Land

Andy Wightman MSP and Guy Shrubsole of FOE and Who Owns England took the lead in this session which sought to analyse how we can increase access to information on land ownership in the UK.

Providing access to information on land is low cost but is essential to solving the crisis on land ownership concentration in the UK. Wightman, MSP and author of Who Owns Scotland shared his own experience of making a cadastral map from historical maps, old registries, county houses with maps of capital gains taxes. Largely, his work entailed pooling a series of old, hard to access and untapped resources to piece together the larger picture of land ownership. Secondary to that are maps of land use and land value which although commissioned by public funds, are produced by the private sector, becoming expensive and difficult to access.

Christian Eriksson from Private Eye also contributed his experience of a 2014 investigation on the location and breadth of 70 000 properties acquired by offshore companies in UK since 2005, the overwhelming majority of which are tax haven companies. In total, these properties are worth a combined 170 billion GBP – and make up an area of land the size of London. Their research also highlighted that in 2014, half of all property sales in one part of West London were conducted by offshore companies.

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The power of democratising land data and mapping and making available land ownership in this country is immense for planners, housing activists, food growers and in the fight against corruption; and in the words of Guy Shrubsole is a very achievable, low-cost goal.

Providing access to info on land is a low-cost, big difference solution to ownership concentration of land in the UK. This discussion has already been continued since Land for What. See the [online discussion forum](#) for more info.

Education, Awareness Raising and Outreach

A key aim of Land for What is raising awareness of land as a fundamental issue that underpins many struggles for food, housing and public space. One way of helping raise this awareness is trying to make land more of a normal topic of conversation. A set of postcards with provocations, facts and questions about land had been produced for the event, with the aim of helping people do just that.

The conversation focussed on changes that might be made to these cards, and alternative approaches to engaging people, through making films, running social media, and carrying out direct action. A key point is the need to start from where people are, and that the “way in” to land issues for many people is to talk about their needs for housing, food, water and places to relax.

We'll be continuing to develop these resources and would welcome input and support. We hope to be able to develop a section on the Land for What? website as a useful hub for people wanting to hold conversations about land in their areas.

Strategy for a Land Reform Movement

The aim of this session is think about what we want to change, in the long, medium and short-term, and developing a strategy for achieving these aims. The workshop was divided into two parts. The first asked people to think about what their overall long-term aims and values are. The second focused on the demands/actions we would like to work out for now. There was a diversity of views, but also lots of agreement.

In the first part, some people expressed the view that land should be held in common, to be used as a resource for all rather than as a source of profit. Others were less ambitious- wanting to have redistribution, more public ownership and a variety of land ownership structures. There was considerable debate as to how far a movement would ultimately go and the extent to which people would directly decide what to do with the land. Nevertheless, the long-term aim is for a system radically different than what we have now.

In the second part, we asked people to consider priorities for short-term and immediate demands in a number of areas - the key areas discussed were engaging with the system and legislation, direct strategies for securing land, and public education.

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The group discussed the importance of following and engaging in key debates on issues related to land use, and pushing for changes to legislation. One such debate was around reform to the planning system. People were also especially interested in reforming taxation, for example introducing a land tax and capping subsidies. They also wanted to stop sale of public land and introduce new laws enabling groups to take over unused land. This might include legalising squatting and enabling the compulsory purchase of unused land. Other suggestions included abolishing buy to let, forcing landowners to provide land for new entrants, increasing rights of access, and increasing transparency on land ownership. Finally the group discussed the need to reform a banking system which is dependent on inflated property/land prices. Some felt that any engagement with the system would need to be alongside raising public awareness and popular protest.

The group also discussed more direct strategies for taking on land and using it for what people need. One approach suggested was to squat unused/disused land, eg to grow food or provide homes. Choosing the right target would be key here (e.g. large landowners), as well as ensuring to do it well and build alliances with other groups. Other direct actions discussed included mass trespass and protest camps. Another approach discussed was to work within the system. This could be buying up land - in the model of groups like Trees for Life, or various Community Land Trusts. It could also mean seeking agreement with landowners for temporary use of land, eg residential

Education was felt to be a key short and longer term priority. This should be aimed at building people's connection to the land and raising their awareness of key struggles. Key struggles discussed included inequality of land ownership and the unfairness of the land subsidy system. Some approaches to achieving this included leaflets, performances, festivals such as Charter of the Forest, public debates, and a general campaign to make land a major issue in the eyes of the public.

Speakers and contributors

Apologies to anyone missing from this list:

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