

TRANSFORMING OUR FOOD SYSTEM

Pathways from
Local food to
Global justice

Organiclea Community Growers
'Food growing on London's edge'



www.organiclea.org.uk



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and dedication to this piece of work!

For more information about OrganicLea, including our current volunteer
opportunities, opening times, training courses and events visit our website:

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Preparing the ground

The UK food system is broken; there is limited access to nutritious, affordable, high-quality food that doesn't cost the earth, that doesn't harm the people who grow and harvest it. Why? There are social, economic and political systems that encourage industrial agricultural practices and leave small-scale agroecological farmers with little support.

As members of OrganicLea Community Growers, a worker's co-operative who grow and sell food on London's edge, we present this booklet as an insight into how we can transform our food system. This booklet is the product of musings over the garden fork and conversations had whilst packing salad bags; we are not journalists or academics but we get our hands dirty every day growing an alternative food system. We hope this booklet makes clear the link between community food projects on the ground and the wider economic, social and political issues around food and farming.

Our first section outlines the differences between industrial and community food systems. Our stance is clear: we believe that community food growing is the only answer to how we will feed future generations. In this section we explore economic, environmental, and social and health benefits of community food growing. We then examine the structural barriers within industrial food models that continue to keep control over our food system in the hands of a few rather than the many.

The second section looks beyond national borders and examines the international social movements that fight for the rights of small-scale food growers. This section offers a hopeful and realistic perspective on how to create change at local and international levels.

Food sovereignty or security?

How are we going to feed ourselves? How will we feed the UK? How will the world feed itself? Some argue that food security, meeting the basic dietary needs of people, is the answer. Others suggest that food sovereignty - the idea that communities control the way food is produced, traded and consumed - represents a more equitable food system.

The international peasant's union La Via Campesina (LVC) offers the concept of food sovereignty in response to the increased international support for industrial agricultural practices. For La Via Campesina, food sovereignty is:

“The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. Food sovereignty puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.”¹

Advocates of food security argue that people need enough food to live healthy and active lives. This does not address how that food is produced, distributed, traded or consumed. Since the 1970s, food security has been the predominant framework used to develop policies and international responses to food and farming issues. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) argues that “food security exists when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”²

As the author Raj Patel points out: “The idea of food security is entirely compatible with a dictatorship – as long as the dictator provided vouchers for McDonald’s and vitamins, a country could be said to be ‘food secure’.”³ Patel is suggesting that food security does not acknowledge the political and economic power imbalances inherent in the global food system. The example illustrates the need to ask hard questions, such as: who controls how food is produced and distributed?

Food sovereignty is an important alternative to food security. Proponents of food sovereignty are fighting for political and social change that acknowledges farmers’ rights to choose how the food they grow will be produced, traded and distributed. This will, in turn, create a food system where people have the right to choose food that is culturally appropriate and sustainably produced in an ecologically beneficial way. In the following section we outline how community food systems based on food sovereignty principles have multiple social, political, and environmental benefits.

The case for community food systems

“We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbours. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously.”

- Grace Lee Boggs

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. If you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

- Lilla Watson

The last few decades have seen a great deal of interest in ‘relocalising’ food. This comes in response to a succession of food safety scandals and the rising number of people suffering from diet-related health issues. There is a growing realisation that our globalised food industry, whatever its advantages, has severe downsides. The imbalance is clear: globally 1.5 billion people are overweight; 870 million people are affected by chronic hunger.⁴ However, we need to go beyond ‘buying local’ if we are to build a truly sustainable and democratic food system. Community food is an alternative framework that addresses providence as well as wider concerns about ecological and social justice. Here is another way of putting it: community food systems are food sovereignty made real at a local level.

Few activities have so many yields as community food projects: they are able to simultaneously address numerous social issues – as well as environmental, social, health, and economic ones. We outline the main elements of these yields here.

Environmental gains

Community food projects provide green space in cities, create bio-diverse ecosystems and improve the soil beneath our feet. We want to focus on one particular issue that community food projects directly address: ‘food miles’. Public awareness around negative impacts of food miles in the late 1990s inspired many to make the connection between the food on our plates and growing ecological crises like climate change.⁵ For example, an apple grown in New Zealand and sold in a UK supermarket will have travelled 12,000 miles on air freights powered by fossil fuels. A tomato grown in Norfolk and sold at a London-based farmers’ market will register around 30 food miles. The Norfolk tomato is considered to have a smaller ‘carbon footprint’.

The food miles debate created an opportunity for the public to make the connection between food and the ecological crises of our day. But those conversations did not take into consideration factors beyond the environmental effects of transportation. Farm machinery, chemical fertilisers and disposable packaging also have an environmental impact. Taking that into account, our ‘locally-grown’ Norfolk tomatoes may not be so sustainable. A tomato grown with chemicals in a heated glasshouse may have a significantly larger carbon footprint than one grown organically, in season, in Spain.

Emissions associated with food production, distribution and consumption account for 19 to 29% of total greenhouse gases.⁶ The production of that tomato will rely on human fuel and labour rather than fossil fuels and heavy machinery. The public campaigns to ‘buy local’ and ‘buy British’ must go one step further and support community food systems that use organic methods in order to create a food system that does not cost the Earth. Organic farming has been shown to have multiple beneficial environmental impacts at the local level.⁷ This represents a fundamental principle of food sovereignty, which prioritises local production and increases biodiversity, rather than depleting it.

Social benefits

For many communities, the politics of food are central in the drive for social justice. Community food projects serve direct community needs, such as providing fresh produce for families, but they also serve a deeper purpose. Growing and eating foods that are tied to people’s traditional ways of knowing and being encourage community members to come together. They also meet an immediate, practical need – access to culturally appropriate and healthy food. In the process, community

members can see themselves as part of a larger movement for change. The Black Panthers, a group advocating for the rights of Black Americans, famously made Free Breakfast for School Children the centre of food-related protest that challenged the structures of hunger and patterns of widespread malnourishment.⁸ By providing every child with a free breakfast, the Black Panthers drew attention not only to the issue of hunger but also made connections to wider power structures, namely systemic racism in the education and judicial systems. With this in mind, we can see how breakfast clubs, soup discos and community lunches can be catalysts for change.

Community food projects grow alternative food cultures that embrace participation, foster more meaningful relationships, and create spaces that consistently challenge dominant power relations. This means that people who feel disenfranchised or are marginalised in their lives outside the garden have a community to rely on and depend on, as well as contribute to. With austerity measures taking a larger and larger toll on entitlement programmes, community gardens provide necessary resources that are difficult to find elsewhere. Some local authorities are now looking to community food projects to provide social services. The National Health Service (NHS) has also started to refer patients to volunteer opportunities in community projects.

Health advantages

A great advantage of community food projects is their capacity to provide produce in a food landscape where fresh fruit and vegetables are often inaccessible.

Jo Clarke, Volunteer Coordinator at Organicea says “*time and again we find that people, especially young people, come to the project with a deep suspicion of vegetables, but steadily wean themselves onto the fresh produce that is grown and served here. After a few weeks it is not unusual to see them eating mixed salad leaves as if they were crisps*” (see Organicea case study on page 8). The health benefits of gardening go beyond what you eat. Gardening also has a positive effect on mental and physical health – it reduces social isolation and improves social integration.⁹ It maintains independence and physical and mental health in older participants.¹⁰ The gentle but physical activity of gardening enables participants to undertake the cardiovascular workout that is required to maintain heart health.¹¹

Economic yields

When discussing community food projects and their benefits, many advocates focus on the social and environmental yields. What has become increasingly clear is that market gardening is a viable enterprise and can often be the bedrock of a local economy. Urban market gardens in London can produce 2.5 kilos of salad with a street value of some £41 per metre squared each year. Vertical Veg, run by a gardening entrepreneur who specialises in growing on balconies and windowsills, reports producing 83 kilos of vegetables per year enabling him to save over £1000

on food bills.¹² So whether your goal is growing to sell or growing to feed your family, growing your own has economic value. Research has also shown that buying local food and produce re-circulates money back into the local economy, meaning more jobs and more opportunities for local and sustainable development.¹³

Growing is relatively inexpensive when compared to other weekend recreations such as golf; and cultivating a patch of land has long been a cheap and effective way of putting food on the table. But it can also provide a sustainable livelihood. In fact, recent research by City & Guilds found that involvement in community food projects develops the skills of participants - not only in horticulture but in ‘soft skills’ and ‘skills for life’, such as numeracy, problem solving, self-management and enterprise.¹⁴ For regulars at many of these projects, it provides a potential pathway to meaningful employment.

It is increasingly rare in our late capitalist economy to experience economic self-determination;¹⁵ productive labour in agriculture, mining and manufacturing is being replaced by more precarious and abstract forms of work. As Hannah Leigh Mackie of Growing Communities Patchwork Farm says: “*To grow food, for oneself and one’s community, is to take back a bit of control from the corporations who dominate so much of modern life. This makes it genuinely empowering.*”

Empowerment of this kind is for many the start of a great journey. Many community food projects demonstrate that another world is possible. Community food systems present a genuine, potent alternative to the dominant, destructive food system that we shall explore in the next section. To finish this exploration of the case for community food systems here are two short case studies of community projects in urban areas that are working to strengthen our food sovereignty in multiple ways.

CASE STUDY

Reading International Solidarity Center (RISC)

Located in the heart of Reading town centre, RISC is a Development Education Centre which works with schools and community groups to raise the profile of global issues and promote action for sustainability, human rights and social justice.

To support its education and campaigning work, the centre organises events on global issues and runs the fair trade World Shop and Global Café. In 2002, RISC created a forest garden on the roof above its conference hall as a resource to demonstrate practical sustainable development. Built from reused or renewable materials, it has over 180 species of useful plants and is a showcase for maximising the education value of the outdoor classroom. It is also open to the public.

This work has led to two further growing projects: FoodFamilies, which supports community food growing in the Reading area; and the Schools Global Garden Network - a nationwide initiative that aims to bring global citizenship into the outdoor curriculum.

Caroline Pragnell describes their work: “With F4F, local people are not just growing food, but growing communities and thinking globally”.

CASE STUDY

OrganicLea

“We produce and distribute food and plants locally, and inspire and support others to do the same. With a workers’ cooperative at our core, we bring people together to take action towards a more just and sustainable society.”

Set up in 2001 in the London Borough of Waltham Forest, OrganicLea manages the 12-acre Hawkwood Plant Nursery on the edge of London - where people come together to learn gardening skills formally and informally. The fruit and vegetables grown at Hawkwood supply OrganicLea’s trade to local restaurants and cafés, its 300-member box scheme, and its two Saturday market stalls. To stock the enterprises, OrganicLea also works directly with organic growers in East Anglia and with local gardeners who trade their surpluses through a ‘Cropshare’ scheme.

OrganicLea offers training and support to public and community organisations that wish to develop food growing spaces, and provides a whole range of volunteering and training opportunities to help people recover from mental ill health, get (back) into work and connect with nature.

OrganicLea is organised as a workers’ cooperative - its fifteen workers collectively manage its operations with equal voice in decisions and equal pay. The co-op hopes to affect wider change through its active membership of the London-based *Community Food Growers’ Network* (CFGN) and the UK-based *Land Workers’ Alliance* (LWA), which is affiliated to La Via Campesina, the global federation of small producers.

OrganicLea’s contribution to London’s overall food economy may be small; but, as their Garden Outreach Worker Liz Beans says, *“We work right at the plant-roots and show that a few people taking positive action together can have a lasting effect on their own lives, and those of their communities. Over the years we have created a small, significant and genuinely alternative food system, and thousands of people have come into contact with us.”*



Organiclea

The case against the global food industry

“National food security is neither necessary, nor is it desirable”

- Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2003

“Today, more than ever, another world is necessary. The destruction of our world through overexploitation, the dispossession of people and the appropriation of natural resources is resulting in climate crisis and deep inequalities which endanger life itself. La Via Campesina says a resounding NO to this corporate-driven destruction.”

- La Via Campesina, the Jakarta Call, 2013

In contrast to the multiple benefits of community food growing outlined in the previous chapter, many forms of food production and distribution have destructive effects on our health, our environment, our communities and our economies. The ‘industrial food chain’ describes systems of food production and distribution that grow food for a commodity market. Its primary aim is not to feed people but to maximise profit.

Supporters of industrial food and farming argue that industrial agriculture has increased the productivity of agriculture dramatically, allowing a plentiful supply of cheap food. This ‘productivist’ narrative has a long history dating back to the industrial revolution and aristocratic fears of popular uprisings and food riots. The most recent iteration began in the 1950s when anxieties about global demographic growth and food supplies were at their peak.¹⁶ With mass investment in chemical inputs, gas-guzzling farm machinery and genetically modified seeds, the world now produces more food than ever before.

Despite increases in productivity the percentage of people suffering hunger and malnourishment has increased. Yet there are enough resources to feed every person in the world 3,000 calories per day. The farmed environment has been severely damaged by production practices, and finite natural resources have been used recklessly. In this chapter we explore the major flaws in the ‘productivist’ discourse, and call for a shift in focus towards more sustainable forms of agriculture. We argue that agroecological methods are capable of producing enough to meet the needs of the present and capable of addressing the needs of the future.

Environmental damage

Industrial agriculture is having devastating effects on ecosystems the world over. These effects are not limited to the way that food is produced; the way food is distributed also has an impact. Industrial agriculture prioritises cultivation of large amounts of one crop over as much land and as many seasons as possible. *Mono-cropping*, as this practice is known, is designed to create commodities. The producer can make use of ‘efficiencies’ connected to scale and simple systems. Its equivalent

in livestock raising are 'intensive feed units', where thousands of animals are reared in confined spaces. Mono-cropping and intensive feed units stand at odds with the way that nature creates resilience through diversity.

To overcome the lack of fertility associated with mono-cropping, scientists behind industrial agriculture have looked to chemical solutions – pesticides, fungicides, insecticides, herbicides and antibiotics that will kill off threats to a crop or animal's health, and fertilisers or feeds that will deliver the macro-nutrients a plant or animal needs to grow. These methods force pests, diseases, bacteria and weeds to adapt into more robust forms that can survive the chemicals designed to destroy them.¹⁷ The implications of chemical treatments have been the subject of remarkably little scrutiny considering the dangers they pose.¹⁸

Alongside damaging ecology, industrial agriculture is responsible for an unprecedented loss of topsoil. A wide range of reports indicate that cultivated soils have lost 30 to 75% of their organic matter during the last 100 years.¹⁹ By cultivating heavily with machines, by killing soil life and by leaving the soil bare the land begins to erode. Landscapes across England are particularly prone to droughts, landslides, and floods when soil structure breaks down.

Since the 1900s, some 75% of plant genetic diversity has been lost as farmers worldwide have left their multiple local varieties and landraces for genetically uniform, high-yielding varieties.²⁰ This standardisation is being driven by concentration in the seed and livestock breeding industries. According to the Erosion Technology Concentration Group, the top ten seed companies control 75.3% of the global seed market,²¹ while Econexus estimates the market share of the biggest four corporations in livestock breeding to be 99%.²² Using intellectual property rights, these companies have privatised the work of generations of farmers who have saved seeds and bred livestock for thousands of years.

Many proponents of the 'productivist' model argue that by growing more food on less land, industrial farms can 'set aside' plots of land as nature reserves.

We argue that loss of genetic diversity, erosion of topsoil and pollution are issues that significantly affect our ability to feed ourselves in the future. As we explore the consequences of the global food system on our health and our communities, we argue that the alternatives, although they demand fundamental changes in our social structure, offer far more convincing and enduring solutions.

Health issues

Globally an estimated 1.2 billion people are underfed,²³ while we produce more than enough to feed everyone.²⁴ However, issues around access to food do not stop at hunger. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food estimates that approximately 2 billion people suffer micronutrient deficiencies because they have inadequate diets.²⁵ In parallel to this, obesity has more than doubled since 1980, with the number of overweight adults now estimated at 1.4 billion.²⁶ As Amartya

Sen points out, famine is rarely a result of the quantitative lack of food, and almost always the result of the lack of entitlement.²⁷

It is widely recognised that globally we produce a significant food surplus.²⁸ When food is viewed as a commodity rather than a right, money and trade take precedence over access to food. Many grains, for example, are seen as commodities and traded on world markets. Investors often stockpile grain once harvested and wait for a better market opportunity rather than distributing it locally.

In the UK, the last few years have seen an increase in the use of food banks, and over half a million children are considered to have a 'minimally acceptable' diet.²⁹ Research into health disparities has analysed the relationship between income and health and shows a disturbing link. For example, low-income adults are 50% more likely to suffer heart disease than adults of the same age with a higher income.³⁰

There is limited research into the effects of industrial agriculture on our health. A good example is the unknown effect of genetically modified (GM) foods. In fact, there has been an unprecedented increase in the land used to grow genetically modified crops in the last twenty years, with over 160 million hectares³¹ in production today. And despite several public campaigns to raise awareness about the potential side effects there is still a lack of independent research into how GM affects our health.³² However, there is recent evidence to suggest that pesticides and herbicides used on GM crops, like glyphosate³³ included in RoundUp, are linked with birth defects, sterility, hormone disruption and cancer.

Ensuring that everyone – regardless of personal income – has access to good education, green space and meaningful opportunities can address the inequalities that affect our health. Creating a people-first food system is one way to challenge our current industrial food system.

Social detriment

As land-based communities are disrupted and links between food and farming obscured, societies are faced with a loss of cultures and customs that surround preparing and sharing foods.

From the productive end of the food web, the industrialisation of agriculture is responsible for consolidating land holdings and increasing mechanisation. This, in turn, forces workers and small-scale farmers off the land. Whether this is by 'making a killing' in business, or the increasingly militarised land grabs taking place around the world, the effects are to push people out of their communities and into urban areas.

This loss of work and place is having profound effects on families and rural communities in the UK. We look out today on a Britain where only 19%³⁴ of the population lives in rural areas and less than 1% of the population works in agriculture.³⁵ A significant proportion of the population continues to work

in food – trucking it around, processing it in factories, stacking it on shelves, serving it in retail outlets – but increasingly these are precarious workers. Social policies muddled by austerity politics are increasingly limiting the autonomy and sense of community that have historically helped small-scale farmers and agricultural workers survive.

Most of those who remain in agricultural work find themselves working increasingly tedious and isolated jobs – from cutting thousands of lettuces a night under floodlights, to packing and processing in sterile conditions disconnected from the fields and the consumers.

Consumers are alienated from the people who grow, harvest, process and deliver their food. With long distance haulage people have lost a vital point of contact with the land and those who feed them, as well as with their traditions and health.

Economic impacts

For farmers and growers, distributors that consistently push down prices squeeze incomes. In the UK it is estimated that producers get on average 7% of the price paid by consumers in a supermarket.³⁶ Even for those farmers and growers who do not sell to supermarkets, prices remain linked to those set by the big retailers.

Producers find themselves working harder to increase the productivity of their land to stay afloat, as well as having to buy more specialised machinery and trying to jump ahead through investment. However, in the absence of any real supply management, producing more just pushes prices lower still.

For consumers, food prices are often too high in the context of housing and utility costs and low wages. Only those holding the monopoly over food distribution find the global food industry to be good business.

Herein lies the real trap of the industrial food system: it leads inevitably to the point where food prices are too high for many consumers to eat healthy nutritious food, and too low for farmers to survive while treating their land, crops and livestock sustainably.

The UK government needs to intervene and set a minimum price for produce so that it can guarantee a stable income to farmers. The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) should also manage supply and production so that markets do not remain flooded with produce. This is a tried and tested way of nurturing domestic agricultural markets, although it has been largely superseded by neoliberal doctrine that does not support the protection of domestic markets.

Another option would be to reframe our current system of farm subsidies to support sustainable, small-scale production. The multiple public benefits of agroecological farming including environmental stewardship, healthy food, strong communities and increased employment.

Governments should support access to good food by fully enforcing existing anti-monopoly legislation. This would be a good start, as would incentivising small-scale, local food retailers. The need for radical change and policy reform is clear. Many families cannot eat healthy nutritious food because of poverty. In the following section we will begin to look beyond the current industrial food system in the UK and explore promising alternatives both here and internationally.

CASE STUDY³⁷

The tip of the Iceberg: Polish seasonal workers on UK farms

We interviewed Pawel in August 2013 at his home in eastern Poland. He had worked two seasons on a huge farm in Cambridgeshire that sells 80 million iceberg lettuces per year to UK supermarkets.

Pawel described how recruitment agencies came to the university where he was studying agriculture in Poland. They recruit around 1000 seasonal workers per year from the university, test their fitness to work and bring them to the UK by bus. Once on the farm Pawel worked to harvest lettuce under floodlights at night. He said workers were paid by piece and would earn around £50 for a 10-hour shift cutting thousands of lettuce.

Pawel described how Eastern European workers were treated very differently to UK workers. He said they were expected to work longer hours and harder shifts for less pay and did not enjoy the same breaks and standards of accommodation. He said that despite low wages, cramped conditions and the precarious employment situation, many Polish students would accept work on mega-farms in the UK because of a lack of work at home.

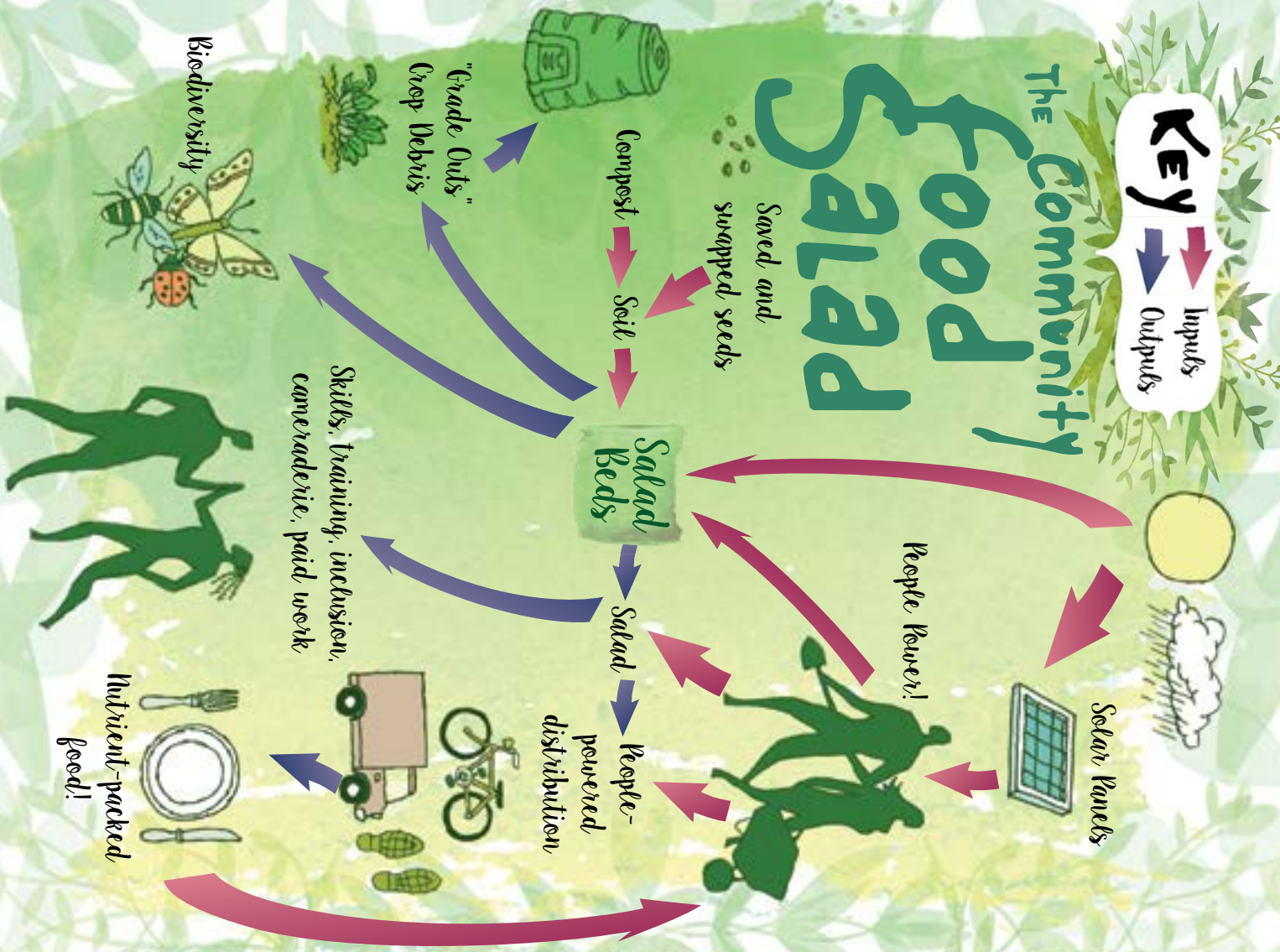
Pawel's experiences are similar to those of millions of other workers from the EU's Eastern member states who face systematic discrimination when moving to work in 'old Europe'.

Discrimination against those workers is 'a pan-European phenomenon', says Professor Carby Hall, the author of a report commissioned by the European Commission in 2008. Although most member states have lifted restrictions on workers from the Eastern member states, they have failed to properly enforce equal employment rights for these groups as enshrined in European treaties.

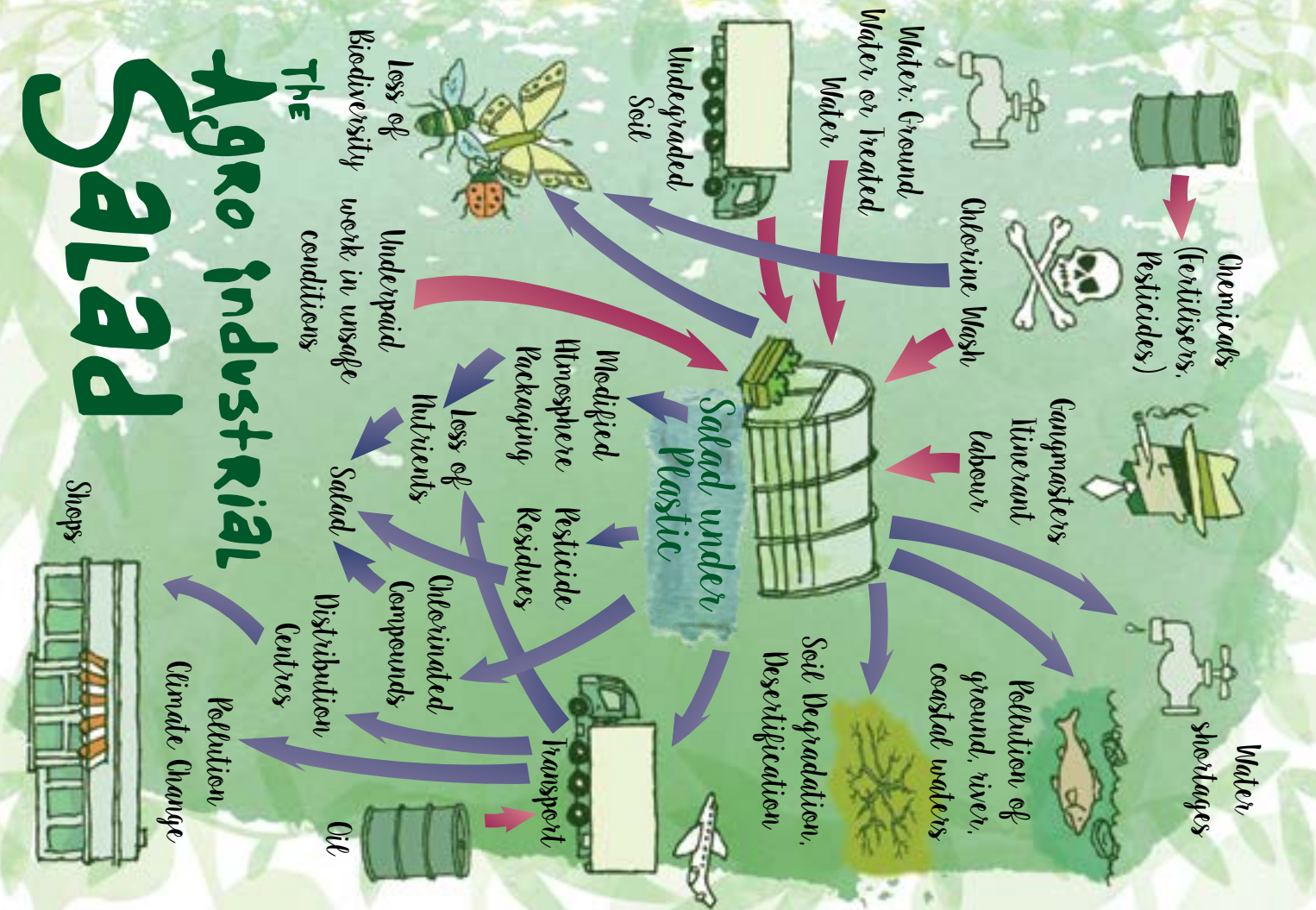
The European Union treaties grant all workers certain rights, such as a minimum wage, protection from unfair discrimination, health and safety protection and working time rights. But instead of equal treatment, many Eastern European migrant workers have had to cope with a system described in the report as 'modern slavery'. Intimidation, emotional abuse or 'exploitative practices' such as late or no payment at all, lack of proper contracts and holiday schemes, and no access to social security were 'frequent' occurrences according to the report.³⁸



The Community Food Salad



The Agro Industrial Salad



CASE STUDY³⁹

Modern day slaves in Spain's salad industry

The Costa del Sol is famous for its tourists and beaches but just behind them is a hidden world of industrial greenhouses where African migrants work in extreme conditions to grow salad vegetables for British supermarkets.

Over 100,000 migrants are employed in the €1.6bn hothouse industry in southern Spain, but charities working with them claim the abuses meet the UN's official definition of modern day slavery.

Conditions appear to have deteriorated further as the collapse of the Spanish property boom has driven thousands of migrants from construction to horticulture to look for work.

Mohammed's story is typical of thousands of Africans working in the greenhouses:

He arrived illegally in southern Spain from Morocco in 2004 to work in the hothouses, having paid €1,000 to smugglers to bring him in a fishing boat. He said back then he could earn €30 for an eight-hour day. Now he is lucky to get €20 a day.

The legal minimum wage for a day's work is currently more than €44, but the economic crisis has created a newly enlarged surplus of migrants desperate for work, enabling farmers to slash wages.

Mohammed's home is a shack in the hothouse area that runs into the tourist town of Roquetas de Mar on the Costa del Sol. It is crudely knocked together from the wooden pallets used to transport the crops and covered with a layer of old agricultural plastic. There is no drinking water or sanitation.

There are 100 or so shacks like this next to Mohammed's. Jobs are sporadic, and come not with contracts but by the day or even by the hour. Sometimes when he and his compatriots have been without work for weeks, there is no food - unless the Red Cross makes one of its food parcel deliveries. "We live like animals scavenging. No work, no money, no food," he said.

Spitou Mendy, who was himself an illegal migrant from Senegal until he gained his papers in an amnesty, now helps run Sindicato de Obreros del Campo (SOC), a small union for migrants.

"You don't find the sons of Spain in the hothouses, only the blacks and people from former colonies," he says. "The farmers only want an unqualified, malleable workforce, which costs absolutely nothing. Only one part of the business is benefiting from this. It's the big agribusiness that wins. It's the capitalists that win. And humanity is killed that way. This is slavery in Europe. At the door to Europe, there is slavery as if we were in the 16th century."

Bridges and Tools: From Local Food to Global Justice

"Globalise struggle, globalise hope"

- La Via Campesina slogan

"We are not birds that live in the air; we are not fish that live in the water. We are peasants who need to live on the land."

- Unified Peasant Movement of Aguan (MUCA)

In this section we will explore how the community food projects discussed earlier are contributing to larger movements for a more just and sustainable food system across the globe.

In the last five years a series of food crises has focused the attention of the world on food security and the ability of food systems to 'feed the world'. Industrial food advocates argue that increasing the use of biotechnology, such as genetically modified seeds, can protect food growers from climate and market volatility. What they fail to take into account is that 70% of our food still comes from small-scale producers⁴⁰ who use low-impact technologies grounded in community traditions (such as seed saving). Even in the European Union, where many imagine industrial agriculture to have a stronghold, the average farm size is only 14 hectares.⁴¹

Our contemporary food crises are rooted in monopolies in food retailing, poverty, lack of entitlement and misguided policies that focus on food as a commodity. Small-scale producers play a central role in maintaining agricultural systems. They enrich agricultural biodiversity by using more ecologically sustainable methods and provide more culturally appropriate foods for their local communities. Unfortunately, small-scale producers are not recognised or are actively opposed in public policy.

Our collective ability to grow food sustainably is an important factor in ending hunger now and for future generations. The model of industrial farming is failing our environment and us. In this context our alternatives of community food systems based on agroecology and food sovereignty offer hope. Nonetheless, they need active support to hold their ground and even more unified action if the model of community food that they embody is to overcome the industrial agriculture paradigm.

The following section gives a brief outline of current social movements that are working toward local and global food justice. We also delve deeper into some of the structural challenges for small-scale farmers in international economic and political policy. And we explore some of the practical things you can do within your own family and community to realise grassroots change.

International social movements

The international peasant's union La Via Campesina (LVC) has been working to unite peasant and indigenous farmers to realise a more just and sustainable world. Their aim is to secure the future food supply by protecting livelihoods and environments. LVC now comprises about 180 local and national organisations in 86 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Altogether it represents over 200 million farmers. It is an autonomous, pluralist and multicultural movement, independent from any political or economic affiliation. La Via Campesina is now recognised as a main actor in food and agricultural debates. It is heard by institutions such as the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation and the UN Human Rights Council, and is widely recognised locally and globally as a voice for small-scale farmers and food producers.

It is important to situate the creation of LVC within the context of resistance and protest in the 1990s. Mass movements such as the Battle for Seattle and opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement confronted a new wave of economic development generally referred to as neoliberalism. Deregulation, privatisation and limiting public and community assets are common tools of the neoliberal agenda. A product of that agenda? The ascendancy of 'free trade' economics. LVC's presence at these demonstrations meant that the public had to recognize that the new wave of neoliberal policies systematically destroyed traditional and sustainable livelihoods of millions of peasant food growers and producers. LVC also became a symbol of a radical alternative to industrial food systems dominated by multinationals.

The basis of LVC is a strong sense of unity and solidarity between small and medium-scale agricultural producers from the global North and South. The main goal of the movement is to realise food sovereignty and create alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. The UK has two members of La Via Campesina: the Landworkers' Alliance, representing small-scale food, fuel and fibre producers, and the Scottish Crofters Federation who represent crofters in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

LVC is based on the conviction that small-scale farmers, including peasant fisher-folk, pastoralists and indigenous people, who make up almost half the world's people, are capable of producing food for their communities and feeding the world in a sustainable and healthy way. In the next sections we outline two of the unifying frameworks at the heart of LVC's work: food sovereignty and agroecology.

Food sovereignty: people-first food systems

La Via Campesina launched the idea of 'food sovereignty' at the World Food Summit in 1996. This idea has now grown into a global people's movement carried by a diverse range of civil society organisations.

Food sovereignty is the right of people to healthy and culturally-appropriate food produced through sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food

and agriculture systems. It outlines a model of small-scale sustainable production that benefits communities and the environment. It puts the aspirations, needs and livelihoods of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations. Peasant or campesino/a ways of knowing and being are at the heart of this concept.

Following La Via Campesina's lead, the UN Human Rights Commission defines a peasant as:

"A man or woman of the land, who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and/or other agricultural products. Peasants work the land themselves, relying above all on family labour and other small-scale forms of organizing labour. Peasants are traditionally embedded in their local communities and they take care of local landscapes and of agroecological systems."

According to this definition, it is clear that many people involved in community food projects would be considered to be peasants. We feel that it is important to build on this definition as a unifying and progressive identity marker to be reclaimed from the derogatory associations many people in the industrial world assign to it. By taking greater pride in land-based work, and the communities and ecologies that surround us, we can see ourselves as part of a global population with multiple commonalities, and build the base for relationships of solidarity.

Food sovereignty prioritises local food production and consumption. It gives countries the right to protect their local producers from cheap imports and to control production. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, water, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce food and not of the corporate sector. Food sovereignty now appears as one of the most powerful responses to current food, poverty and climate crises.

Agroecology: overgrow the status-quo

In February 2015, LVC peasant-farmer delegates gathered in Mali to create a declaration and come to a common understanding of agroecology. For LVC, agroecology unites diverse practices across many cultures to create a common focus on working with natural cycles. Delegates agreed that "agroecology means that we stand together in the circle of life, and this implies that we must also stand together in the circle of struggle against land grabbing and the criminalisation of our movements."⁴² Like food sovereignty, agroecology is a conceptual tool to understand how food growers sit at the intersection of ecological, financial and political issues. The term agroecology goes beyond 'sustainable' or 'ecological' or 'organic' because it acknowledges the complex political and social issues around making a good living from working the land.

Truly sustainable agriculture comes from a combination of the recovery and revalorisation of traditional peasant farming methods, and the innovation of

new ecological practices. One of the oldest and simplest agroecological farming techniques is terracing; this creates a number of growing beds from a sloped hill in a step-like effect. Terracing allows farmers to work with the natural contours of the land. It helps to ensure the even flow of water and reduces soil compaction. Other examples include saving seeds, creating compost, using handmade tools, and integrated systems such as aquaculture where fish are bred in the water of rice fields.

Agroecology can be defined by the following principles:⁴³

- Enhance the recycling of fertility and optimise nutrient availability without reliance on imported fertilizer;
- Create favourable soil conditions for plant growth by managing organic matter, improving soil structure, cultivating ground cover and enhancing soil biotic activity;
- Minimise the loss of resources by way of microclimate management, water harvesting and soil management;
- Promote agricultural biodiversity in time and space;
- Enhance beneficial biological interactions in agricultural systems.

Better trade conditions: how can we change policy?

The movement for food sovereignty and agroecology puts economic inequalities at the heart of its arguments. In this section we outline the current international trade climate and introduce the critique from a small-scale food producers' perspective.

International financial institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) create trade policies based on neoliberal principles that disadvantage farmers all over the world. These institutions enforce free trade policies where debt forgiveness and lower interest rates are offered in exchange. In Vietnam, for example, WTO encouraged the clearance of the Central Highlands – home to indigenous communities employing traditional agroecological farming – in order to grow cash crops such as coffee. When the world coffee market crashed because Vietnamese coffee flooded the market, many pointed to the flawed economic plan: there was more coffee than there was demand. This caused international coffee prices to drop significantly and made coffee farming unviable for hundreds of thousands of coffee farmers in Central America. The coffee crisis is an example of how neoliberal policies prioritise food as a commodity over food as a livelihood.

As outlined previously, there are key problems in global trade and public policy that exacerbate inequalities in the food system and inhibit the development of alternatives. Addressing these is a key step towards socially and environmentally

just food systems. Towards this end various proposals have been made by social movements and researchers for policy changes to support food sovereignty; we present six key policy changes here:⁴⁴

1. Market access and the right to choose

Experience shows that politically weaker countries find it hard to impose countervailing duties or tariffs because the world trade system is based on profound imbalances of power. Countries are obliged to offer foreign companies access to their domestic markets because of pressure from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank to decrease public debt. However, once they do so they often find their markets flooded with foreign products that enter the market at prices below the cost of production. This undercuts local producers and pushes many farmers out of agriculture.

Ending this kind of 'dumping' would involve eliminating visible and hidden export subsidies or banning international trade in farm products at prices below the cost of production. Furthermore, all countries would be allowed to place import taxes, quotas and bans to stop products entering their markets at prices below the local cost of production.

To end dumping would effectively require complementary policies within the EU and the US. These policies would ensure that export prices capture the full cost of production. An interesting way of doing this, proposed by the National Family Farm Coalition in the USA, would be to re-establish a minimum price or 'floor price' for agricultural products reflecting their costs of production. These would be minimum prices set by the government, which companies buying any product would have to meet.

2. Supply management

As price floors have been removed around the world, prices have dropped and farmers have found themselves increasing production and exploitation of their resources to secure some kind of livelihood. This perpetual overproduction is a downward spiral for the world's producers; as they struggle to produce more to compensate for lower prices and higher input costs, they contribute to oversupply and drive the prices lower and lower. How could this vicious circle be stopped? There are two key steps to achieve supply management: to instate production-limiting policies for key crops and to reinstate public control of surplus. Interestingly, a study in 2003 found that in the US supply management could lead to a net reduction of \$10–12 billion per year in farm subsidies – representing a huge saving for taxpayers.⁴⁵ However, the study highlighted that without addressing monopolies in food retail this is unlikely to translate to higher prices for farmers.

3. Dismantling retail feudalism

The ability of large corporations to fix prices is a key driving force behind low farm prices and high consumer prices. Without weakening their grip on markets and policy the changes outlined here will be impossible. Competition law designed to mitigate the impact of monopolies does exist, but it is often enforced inadequately.

However, in many places policy reform would only be the beginning of meaningful change as competition policies fail to deal adequately with oligopolies. In the UK, for example, Tesco has a massive 26.8% share of the market; however, its power is amplified far more by the fact that just four companies control over 75% of the market. These four companies often speak with one voice through lobby groups such as the 'British Retail Consortium', giving them massive power in UK policy and markets.

4. Not all subsidies are bad

It is important to make a distinction between legitimate public investment in farming, food production and biodiversity, and wasteful subsidies that do not address the causes of problems farmers face. It is often said that subsidies are the root of the problem facing farmers in the EU. This misrecognises the fact that subsidies are a response to low prices rather than their cause. In the EU today subsidies are a poor response that currently do little to address oversupply and offer little support to small-scale producers. The key questions is what kind of subsidies are being given to whom, and for what ends?

5. Access to land and resources

Securing access to land and productive resources for those who want to make their livelihoods from food production is a key step. This would involve the double task of regulating investments in land by companies, and redistributing land to those who want to farm it. A crucial part of this process is the recognition of farmers' rights to access the productive resources necessary for food production. From access to water, to the right to breed, trade and grow livestock and seeds, there is a pressing need for unified legislation that puts the needs of small-scale farmers at the centre of the debate and guarantees their rights to produce.

6. Where are these decisions made anyway?

Most of the decisions that affect farmers are being made far away from the fields and farms. In fact many of the policies that stand in the way of food sovereignty stem from undemocratic institutions with little accountability or transparency. We need to revive and democratise global forums so that public policy is created by governments that are accountable, in dialogue with civil society institutions.

LVC calls for a new dialogue on the future of food and agriculture focused on the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation and the UN Centre for Trade and Development, along with the International Labour Organisation.

It can be hard to see hope in institutions such as these, but by joining ranks with other community food producers, farmers and growers we can form a strong voice that will speak and act as representatives of small-scale farmers around the world.

Beginning at home

It seems appropriate to end this short booklet with some inspiring case studies and a few practical things that you can do with your friends and family to start walking the paths from community food to global justice. Here are a few tentative suggestions:

Clear ground Read this booklet again; look at the labels of the food you eat and ask questions.

Start composting Withdraw support for supermarkets; limit your purchases of pre-packaged goods; be critical of 'best before' dates; build a wormery!

Sow seeds Pass this booklet on; have conversations about food politics and policy with friends, family and strangers.

Strike cuttings Meet your local farmers and growers; go to a seed swap; feed your family and friends good food.

Keep it all watered Support your local organic box scheme or farmers' market.

Protect and survive Look out for events and campaigns that support community food and food sovereignty; defend gardens and allotments under threat.

Harden off Talk to shops/ cafés/ pubs about local sourcing.

Plant out Grow something you love and something your neighbours love; reclaim neglected land with some friends.

Mulch Strengthen your relationships; sustain your energy.

Weed it, feed it, pest and disease it Make time to study and time to take action.⁴⁶

Observe and interact Subscribe to *The Land* at www.thelandmagazine.org.uk.

Harvest the crop Do you want to make a livelihood from food? What are your options?

Preserve and feast Brew your own beer, pickle some cucumbers and invite friends over.

Celebrate Get together with other community food growers at May Day, Harvest Festival, Equinoxes and Solstices.

Prune and shape Join or start a network in your bioregion; join the Land Workers' Alliance (www.landworkersalliance.org.uk)

Rest and resolve Are you living as you want to?

Plan for the seasons to come Organise an event to share your journey with others. Go and meet a farmer you respect; follow the inspiration.

Creating a meaningful, sustainable and viable livelihood from small-scale food production is not easy but it can be done. Here are two short case studies to inspire you to make the leap.

CASE STUDY

Sarah Bentley's Story

As a teenager growing up in a sleepy Lincolnshire market town I idealised working in fashion and media, which I did for ten years after arriving in London aged 18.

My work took me to places like Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Nigeria and Mozambique. On these travels my eyes were opened to the impact of globalisation, climate change, colonialism, dodgy World Bank interventions, food speculation and the impact of materialism gone mad. Closer to home I started to notice the appalling ill health people in the UK suffered due to a crap diet, something that as a veggie since age nine had bypassed me!

I got serious and started working for the Ecologist, BBC World Service and writing issues-led pieces for ARISE. But my media work didn't feel like it was making an impact. I did a heap of searching. I volunteered at 38 Degrees, took Direct Action training (a bit scary!), watched documentaries, stayed in eco-communities, taught myself to grow organic food and started volunteering at Growing Communities.

I realised growing your own organic food in the city – and encouraging other people to do so – was a brilliant way to stick two fingers up to the man, reduce your carbon footprint, help global food security, get in touch with nature and boost your health. Armed with these revelations I phased out media work and today I divide my week as a Growing Communities Patchwork Farmer, a food growing teacher at The Garden Classroom for kids with special needs, and I run the Made in Hackney Local Food Kitchen (MIH), which I founded in October 2012.

Unlike my media work I see the benefits of these projects every day. From seeing ill-looking people who

Sarah Bentley



say they hate cooking veg but eat it with gusto; to watching the penny drop as someone realises what 'organic' really means and why it's important; to the amazed look on kids' (and adults') faces as they pull carrots out of the soil for the first time.

I know the local food scene alone won't bring about the changes I hope to see in the world. But in the mix of urgent 21st century missions – transitioning to renewable energy systems, reforming the banks, re-shaping capitalism, ending slavery conditions for the global workforce who make our stuff – it's a pivotal movement with ripple effects that go way beyond the end of our forks.

CASE STUDY

Sarah Green's Organics

I am the third generation of my family to farm on our family farm in Tillingham; I farm in partnership with my parents Steven and Sally.

I was very fortunate to have grown up on a farm. Despite being surrounded by agriculture and having a very outdoors childhood it wasn't until my mid-teens that I took an interest in farming.

I joined my local young farmers club when I was 16 and it was a revelation to meet other young people, my age, that were interested in agriculture and who worked within the industry. At school we read *Far From the Madding Crowd* and I remember thinking how lovely it would be to work with the seasons. I also got some experience helping with the lambing on a couple of local farms, which I loved.

After only a few weeks away on my gap year, away from my school peers, I realised that I wanted to farm. I enrolled at Writtle College to study agriculture the following September. On my college placement year I worked on a large farm in Kent growing iceberg lettuces for the supermarkets. During my placement year I quickly learnt that I didn't want to work with the supermarkets. I wanted to work where food wasn't wasted because it was the wrong size and to be in a situation where the farmer got paid a fair price. I also realised that if I had to work that hard I wanted to work for my family.

In my final year at Writtle College my parents put 25 acres of land into organic conversion with the Soil Association and that's where 'Sarah Green's Organics' started.



Sarah Green

This booklet is dedicated to Katy Andrews, who supported OrganicLea in the early years and whose dedication to 'being the change' in Waltham Forest has touched many lives. A kind donation in her memory from family and friends has helped make this booklet a reality.

OrganicLea is a workers' co-operative based on London's edge in the Lea Valley. We grow organic food on our 12-acre site, distribute food and plants locally, and inspire and support others to grow food too. We are part of the Community Food Growers Network: www.cfgn.org.uk
 The Landworkers' Alliance: www.landworkersalliance.org.uk
 La Via Campesina: www.viacampesina.org

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