

**From Prof Tim Lang, PhD FFPH
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Oliver Rodker
51 Chelsea Park
Bristol
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Dear Mr Rodker,

Re: The Ecological Land Co-operative

I write this letter as an academic with 35 or so years involvement in food policy analysis. For the last four years, too, I have been a Commissioner for Land Use and Natural Resources on the Sustainable Development Commission. I am writing here informed by that experience. The purpose of my writing is to express my support for the thinking behind the work of the Ecological Land Co-operative (ELC). Like many who analyse the UK food system, I am concerned about its unsustainability and the need to rethink what we mean by food security.¹ Against a number of indicators – energy, greenhouse gases, water, land use, ecological footprint, waste, to name a few – how we produce, process, distribute, consume and under-utilise food is unsustainable.² What has been called ‘new fundamentals’ by the Chatham House food supply project are likely to re-orient the UK’s food supply and policies.³

That much is increasingly recognised at national level. The Cabinet Office’s 2008 *Food Matters* report⁴ and the Sustainable Development Commission’s *Green, Healthy and Fair*⁵ and 2009 *Food Security and Sustainability: the perfect fit*⁶ reports all point to the need to introduce change, firmly but clearly. One might debate whether the moves that such

¹ See D Barling, R Sharpe, T Lang (2008). *Rethinking Britain’s Food Security*. Report to Soil Association.

<http://www.soilassociation.org/Whyorganic/Climatefriendlyfoodandfarming/Foodsecurity/tabid/345/Default.aspx>

² For some of my own work, see T Lang, D Barling, M Caraher (2009). *Food Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, or E Millstone & T Lang (2008) *The Atlas of Food*. London: Earthscan

³ Chatham House Food Supply in the 21st century: the new dynamic. <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/research/food/>

⁴ http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/food_policy.aspx

⁵ <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=692>

⁶ <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=981>

reports have encouraged are yet deep or fast enough, but we cannot but be pleased that there is acceptance within government and in the business world that change is inevitable. We are now longer facing denial, only discussions about direction.

At the local level also there is a mushrooming of experimentation and debate. Projects are emerging, backed by local authorities, communities, cities, counties and devolved administrations. Foundations, charities and non governmental organisations – the civil society sector – too are recognising the need to involve ‘ordinary’ people. Bodies such as the National Trust have shown real verve and imagination in releasing allotments on its holdings to give more room to the appetite the British now show for growing food and rebuilding their own shorter food supply routes.⁷

Despite this good news, a number of stumbling blocks are apparent. These range from continuity of funding or access to capital and resources to access to land, the prime source of food. It is in this last respect that I am happy to support the kind of thinking the Ecological Land Co-operative exhibits. Land ownership in the UK is highly concentrated yet land is the ultimate societal resource. A tiny percentage own most of farmable land. True, there are millions of gardens and plots of land attached to housing, and that too is being re-evaluated even in developed societies such as the UK. Urban land is a hugely important resource with potential to re-engage urban populations in the delights as well as vagaries of growing food.

In the UK – England particularly – the countryside has tended to be sparse with regard to housing. The croft and small holding tradition, still apparent elsewhere in the UK and Europe, was eroded by the enclosure movements from the 15th and 16th centuries. The arrival of ‘scientific’ farming added to that trend, with field patterns and roads concentrating landholdings and encouraging the movement of populations either to villages or towns. Industrialisation accelerated and sealed the trend.

As an old country, the UK has considerable legal, cultural and emotional baggage with regard to housing in the countryside. In the 21st century, I believe we need to review that legacy and to encourage some to live and work on small-holdings. Not only does this breathe back real work in the countryside (rather than enshrining it as commuter land), but it also enables us to experiment with productivity. It should not be an excuse to turn backs on the urbanised majority. On the contrary, new relationships between food-producing countryside and house-concentrated towns are required. It was a theme of the 2002 Policy Commission chaired by Sir Don Curry, for example.⁸

I therefore wish you well in your bid to get planning permission for residential buildings in Devon. I support this if it is tied to ecological food production and to the production of surpluses of health-enhancing food. Those goals, as well as the rebuilding of land-based skills, are likely to be required. As the recent report of the industry task force on peak oil recognised, farming and food retailing (ie the entire food cultural system) are locked in to

⁷ http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-global/w-news/w-latest_news/w-news-growing_spaces.htm

⁸ Report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (2002) London: Cabinet Office. <http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/farming/>

oil dependency.⁹ If big corporations now openly acknowledge this, we need socially responsible experiments and imaginative projects to be supported and audited at local level.

Good luck with your thinking and projects.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Lang', written in a cursive style.

Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy

⁹ Industry Taskforce on Peak Oil & Energy Security (ITPOES) 2nd Report. February 2010.
<http://peakoiltaskforce.net/download-the-report/2010-peak-oil-report/>