

# Innovative Approaches to Securing Land

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Farm walk at Tablehurst Farm, Sussex.

Director of the Biodynamic Land Trust in the UK, Martin Large outlines how the biodynamic movement has catalysed a shift towards new ways of holding and securing farmland as a basis for flourishing societies.

How can we develop an economy that works for everyone? How are we freeing our culture, such as the media, education and health from corporate and state capture? How can we reclaim our democracy and political life through respecting equal human rights and pushing back the market? And how are we caring for the earth, for Mother Nature, at a time of ecological crisis?

All these burning social questions are addressed by Dr. Rudolf Steiner's\* vision for society, of societal threefolding. His social and economic ideas have been taken up seriously by the biodynamic movement. In Britain and elsewhere, biodynamic farms are green oases in a countryside that looks increasingly like an agri-desert cleared of people and real farming. You only have to visit a biodynamic farm to experience how special and life-giving these farms are. Visit Tablehurst Community Farm in Sussex on a summer Saturday, with its busy farm shop, the barbecue for families to use, children playing, volunteers working, in a setting of fields of healthy vegetables, with cattle, chickens and pigs.

The biodynamic movement has piloted significant social and economic innovations that are now spreading 'glocally' through the slow food movement. In particular are four innovations: Community Supported Agriculture, Person to Farm financing, community farmland trusts and societal threefolding in practice. This article will briefly describe these and then focus on the importance of securing land for biodynamic farms.

## Associative Economics

Firstly, biodynamic pioneers such as Trauger Groh drew on Steiner's idea of associative economics to invent Community Supported Agriculture. One form of CSA means that customers who are members of a co-op, such as our Stroud Community Agriculture Farm, guarantee the farmers' income by committing to contributing monthly to an annually agreed farm budget. Customers associate with the farmers to identify needs, agree what produce will be grown, how it will be distributed and financed. Whilst there are now many types of CSA, the original innovation was based on associative economics informed by the principle of mutuality.

## Person to Farm Financing

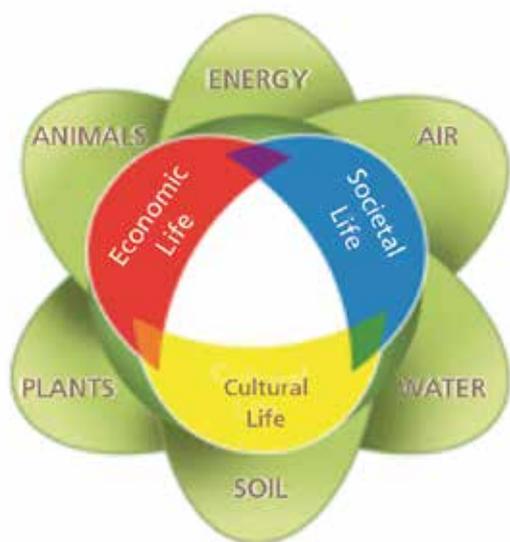
Secondly, biodynamic farms quietly pioneered the P2F, person to farm, financing of farm working capital. For example, over 400 members of the Tablehurst Farm Co-op raised around £168,000 non profit shares in the 1990's to capitalise the farm business. There are now all kinds of creative variations such as pig shares, cow shares and fruit shares where customers co-invest and co-produce with the farmer to get the food they need. The recent development of Crowdfunding is a form of P2P gift, venture and/or loan financing. The biodynamic movement has been at the forefront of pioneering community shares, and helping re-invent this traditional method of co-operative community financing.

## Threefold Social Renewal

Thirdly, the biodynamic movement has successfully, and I believe uniquely, drawn on Steiner's vision for social renewal through societal threefolding. One shining

*\*Dr Rudolf Steiner (1861 -1925) was an Austrian philosopher, researcher and social reformer, well-known for the many schools worldwide bearing his name. He gained his PhD after editing Goethe's scientific writings.*

example is Sekem, an hour's drive north of Cairo in Egypt. [see also p 37. Ed.] Named after the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for vitality, Sekem is a social ecosystem grounded in biodynamic farming that offers a successful working example of how society could develop. Founder, Dr Ibrahim Abouleish describes Sekem as based on four interacting, dynamic spaces. Biodynamic farming and care for the earth is the foundation of Sekem, generating viable social businesses, an inclusive community and a vibrant cultural life. This is expressed not just through rights, but also for example in the weekly closing circle of up to a thousand Sekem workers when contributions to the community are shared.



*Embedded in the biodynamic farm, Sekem's sustainability model is based on three distinct activities that do not impose on one another: Economy, Rights (in the social realm - legalities etc), and Culture. It differs significantly from modern western societies where the economy overrides all other spheres, including agriculture.*

*[Field trials on Sekem's biodynamic methods of cultivating cotton were instrumental in changing Egypt's government policy, ending the aerial spraying of 35,000 tonnes of pesticides annually. Today some 850 farmers are members of the Egyptian Biodynamic Farming Assn. Ed.]*

### Farm Land Trusts

The biodynamic movement has helped pioneer a fourth social innovation, the charitable trusteeship of farms for long-term biodynamic stewardship.

Although concepts of public open space, land as a commons and community land trusteeship have been around at least since the 19th century land reformers such as John Ruskin, Ebenezer Howard, Tolstoy and Octavia Hill, the biodynamic movement has been in the forefront of pioneering farm land trusts to protect farms and secure them affordably for farmers<sup>1</sup>.

If no family member wants to continue farming, some families prefer to entrust the farm, rather than face the

potential conflicts about who benefits from any sell-off. German biodynamic farmers were early pioneers of charitable farm trusts. For example, Ernst-Wilhelm Barkhoff of the GLS Bochum Bank worked with farmers to transfer ownership of a biodynamic farm in 1969 to an Agricultural Research Association, especially set up for that purpose. Steiner's basic insight that land cannot be lent or sold as a commodity, but rather is a commons that provides the life conditions for us all, was key to entrusting farmland.

Today, over 80 biodynamic farms in Germany are held by charitable trusts. The benefits include affordable access for new farmers, community links and protecting the future of the farms. Currently, a national biodynamic farmland trust in Germany is being developed to improve governance, technical expertise and financing.<sup>2</sup>

### From New Hampshire to Shropshire

I first came across a biodynamic farmland trust while on a Winston Churchill travelling scholarship in the USA in 2003.<sup>3</sup> Trauger Groh at Temple Wilton Farm in New Hampshire told me the story of their community farm buy-out into the Yggdrassil Farm Land Trust and of the connection between community-supported farms and the need to secure farmland into trust to protect it from the market.<sup>4</sup> One key reason for protecting farms through trusteeship is that the social, economic, food, cultural and landscape value created by such farms as Temple Wilton is considerable. If the farmland is not protected, then land speculators will move in and profit from the value created by the farm and the CSA community for example through gentrification, which forces the creative pioneers out.

On my return to Britain, when CSA's asked how to secure and protect their land, we at Stroud Common Wealth got funding to action-research the feasibility of a community farmland trust and set up some pilots.<sup>5</sup> Our lead project, Fordhall Farm in Shropshire, so caught the public imagination in 2006 with a community buy out by over 8000 people investing in community shares that the news went round the world, much to our surprise. Fordhall Farm faced a hostile selloff. So the third generation tenant farmers Charlotte Hollins, 24, and her brother Ben, 21, together with many volunteers and supporters, set up Fordhall Community Land Initiative Ltd. with our technical assistance. This pioneering 123-acre organic farm is now held in community benefit society trusteeship – protected and capturing value for future generations. We set up FCLI as a Community Benefit Society, an old co-op structure with charitable status, to hold Fordhall Farm in trust and lease it affordably to the young farmers. The mission is to run Fordhall Farm as an educational, environmental and social resource, helping to reconnect people to food, farming and the countryside. It aims to show that small-scale farming, connected to the local community, offers a viable way of life for generations to come.

Right from the start, Fordhall farmer Charlotte Hollins wanted practical ways of engaging people with the farm, and making it a community resource. She came to us in early 2005 at Stroud Common Wealth and asked for ideas and assistance. We suggested that the farm could be safeguarded in the form of a Community Benefit Society, for which unusually we got charity at law status. This means that the farmland is mutualised – a democratic, one-member one-vote structure is set up, and members can invest in non-profit withdrawable shares of £50 each. Members vote at AGM's for a board, which runs FCLI on their behalf, runs a variety of educational and environmental programmes and leases the land to the farmers.



CR: [HTTP://SHROPSHIREORGANICGARDENERS.ORG.UK](http://SHROPSHIREORGANICGARDENERS.ORG.UK)

*Charlotte Hollins tells the story of saving Fordhall.*

Through supporting Fordhall, people knew they were helping conservation, preserving wildlife, saving a historic organic farm and connecting with the land. At a time when the government is busy privatising public land, for example trying to sell off our forests, Fordhall could show the first beginnings of a sea change in values from treating land as a commodity, to seeing land as a commons, as a right, to which the community can control access in open, democratically accountable and equitable ways.

What surprised me most was that through Fordhall we reinvented, almost by accident, both community shares and the charity at law community benefit society co-op structure. Whereas some in the established co-op movement told us 'you can't do that!', Co-operatives UK researched what we had done, much improved it and then so effectively spread the word that there are now hundreds of such ventures, particularly in the community land, pub, energy, housing and food areas.<sup>6</sup>

## Social Leverage

In summary, these four social innovations: Community Supported Agriculture, Person to Farm financing, community farm land trusts and societal threefolding are like acupuncture points, key leverage points for an emerging social economy.

However, the innovations and greening of agrideserts that biodynamic farms can bring about are not possible without first securing the land. Buying land is very tough now that the price has quadrupled in ten years, driven by speculation and the financial crisis leading to people investing in land as a safe store of value. The UK government also gives huge tax breaks to offshore land owners. And, as Mark Twain once said, 'The trouble with land is that they are not making it anymore.' So the last part of this article looks at the story of the UK based Biodynamic Land Trust, the learning and the potential.

The Biodynamic Land Trust was established in 2011 to hold land as a commons, off the market, and to lease it affordably to biodynamic farmers. Setting up the BDLT was made possible by a generous donor, who asked, after I had described our Fordhall Farm work, 'What about setting up a Biodynamic Farm Trust? And here is a founding donation!'

The BDLT now has a Board representing 145 members who have invested community shares to help buy 38 acres of land to lease to Tablehurst Community

Farm, and 34 acres of land at Dartington, South Devon, to lease to the Apricot Centre. It has also played a crucial role in saving the 150 acre Rush Farm near Redditch, Worcestershire, in 2014 by supporting the development of a partner, Stockwood Community Benefit Society, both as an anchor investor and as a custodian trustee. The Rush Farm community buy out is unusual because the rentals from Stockwood Business Park can help pay modest interest on member's shares and also cross subsidise the farm.

Normally, community shares for farmland purchase cannot pay interest because most farms do well just to break even, and pay modest land rents. It is rare for farms to be profitable enough to be able to pay mortgage interest for the current high farmland costs. This is why farms can be seen more as cultural enterprises, which carry out important food growing, health, conservation, wildlife, landscape and educational activities. So as with wildlife, heritage and conservation land trusts, the BDLT, as a farmland trust has to secure land with a combination of gifts, community shares, and interest free loans.

## Biodynamics, Permaculture and Agro-ecology

The BDLT's next acquisition will be Huxham's Cross Farm at Dartington, near Schumacher College. It will draw on a rich toolbox of Biodynamic, Permaculture Design, Agro-ecology and Agroforestry principles in developing 34 acres to support up to four working people with skills in field-scale vegetable production, animal husbandry, protected cropping, fruit growing, food processing, training, administration, marketing, selling, wellbeing work, working with children and the community.

One key feature of work at Huxhams will be researching the transformation of soils degraded by years of maize and barley monoculture. Starting from bare land that has been conventionally farmed provides an ideal opportunity to measure the changes that happen during the conversion period. Base-line soil and biological surveys will be done from the start and regularly thereafter to measure the changes in the soil and site flora and fauna, productivity and community wellbeing. Long-term research in Switzerland at FIBL has shown that Biodynamic methods create a richer soil micro flora and fauna over a 20-year period, but little such research has been carried out in the UK on BD methods.<sup>7</sup>

### We all need land to belong to

Such farms generate good food, health, community building, care for the soil, wildlife and create a working, living countryside. The biodynamic movement shows it is possible to change the world one farm at a time. People concerned about climate change and the environment can take practical action by supporting biodynamic farms. As we say at Stroud Community farm, 'we all need land to belong to'. And the BDLT sees farmland as a community to which we can belong.

Whilst the BDLT has limited seed capital to secure land into trust, we can work wherever there are capable farmers, a viable farm business plan, and a local, national and even international community of interested people to support financing the farm by giving, investing and joining the BDLT.

Some farmers are considering transferring their farms into the BDLT, with one farmer already bequeathing their farm. Others are asking how to enable farmer succession. The process of securing farms into trust can be complex, so we are seeking funding to set up a national farmland trust action research project. This has been sparked by several organic and mainstream farmers asking us for help in protecting the long term future of their farms.

Great oaks from little acorns grow. Connecting with small farms such as Huxham's Cross Farm is vital for developing truly holistic and sustainable food systems. Sekem could have remained just a small biodynamic farm, but it grew



CR: VINCENT MASSON



*Strikingly different soil structure, colour, moisture retention and texture of conventional (samples left) and biodynamically (samples right) cultivated soils.<sup>8</sup>*

into a world exemplar of right livelihood, in the most difficult of circumstances.

Dr Abouleish's inspiring invitation for the 'whole world to develop' stayed with me after my brief visit in February 2014. For me, this means helping establish and protect biodynamic farms as green oases through securing farmland into the Biodynamic Land Trust or partnership bodies. Biodynamic farms help build communities and bring about food, social, cultural, environmental and economic renewal. Practically, we can all make a big difference by helping entrust one biodynamic farm at a time to build a global social farming movement. 🌱

1 SEE COMMONS SENSE: CO-OPERATIVE PLACE MAKING AND CAPTURING VALUE FOR 21ST CENTURY GARDEN CITIES CONATY, PAT, AND MARTIN LARGE EDS, 2013 CO-OPERATIVES UK AND HAWTHORN PRESS

2 BAHNER, TITUS ET AL, RELEASING THE TRUE VALUE OF LAND, IBDA, HITZACKER, GERMANY 2012

3 SEE LARGE, MARTIN, COMMON WEALTH FOR A MORE EQUAL, FREE, MUTUAL AND SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY, CHAPTER 10, HAWTHORN PRESS, STROUD, UK, 2010

4 THE YGGRASSIL LAND FOUNDATION, RUDOLF STEINER FOUNDATION, MICHAEL FIELDS AND THE NORTH AMERICAN BDA WORK TOGETHER TO SECURE BIODYNAMIC LAND

5 STROUD COMMON WEALTH IS A NON-PROFIT ENABLER OF COMMUNITY ASSET TRUSTEESHIP AND SOCIAL BUSINESS

6 SEE WWW.UK.COOP, COMMUNITY SHARES

7 MADER P./ FLIESSBACH A, DUBOIS D, GUNST L, FRIED P, NIGGLI U (2002) SOIL FERTILITY AND BIODIVERSITY IN ORGANIC FARMING IN SCIENCE MAGAZINE 10.1126/SCIENCE. 107114

8 SEE MASSON, VINCENT, AT THE HEART OF BIODYNAMIC AGRICULTURE, STAR AND FURROW, JANUARY 2015