

# OPINION

## The spirit of co-operation



CHRISTINE  
TACON

I HAVE been working on a task force set up by Hilary Benn to increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables and their production in the UK.

It is well recognised we only produce about 10 per cent of all our fruit and 60 per cent of vegetables, but import a vast amount from the Netherlands and France which we could grow in the UK.

Wholesale markets, which are responsible for about a third of all fruit and vegetable supply, import a far greater percentage than the retailers.

It seems as farmers and growers, we are so focused on retail markets we have not serviced the wholesalers: we treat them as outlets for our over-supply. When we ask wholesalers why they source from overseas, they say they can source what they want, when they want, often from one supplier, which can't from the UK.

Supply chains are different on the continent, with distributors being the main product marketers, but the main difference is most of the suppliers are co-operatives and draw from a very wide base of growers to ensure continued supply and great efficiency.

The size of some of these businesses is huge, compared to large growing businesses in the UK, with The Greenery's turnover being about the same as total UK fruit and veg. Another difference is that, as co-operatives, they are able to access grants as producer organisations (POs), which equate to about 2 per cent of turnover.



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These grants can be used to fund shared facilities and services. In the Netherlands about 90 per cent of growers are members of a PO but that figure is less than 30 per cent in the UK.

Grants or no grants, there is a very clear picture that British growers are being increasingly disadvantaged by our lack of co-operation, in whatever form, and these continental businesses are competing very successfully in our market place.

Not only are these continental growers and co-operatives targeting our markets, but they are also

investing heavily in the UK, often backed by co-operative banks, some of them also farmer-owned, meaning profits made in the UK are going back to the continental co-operative owner-members, making them more competitive.

As a business with co-operating at its heart, Co-operative Farms' have tried in the past to work with other large farmers, but had limited success.

We ourselves are part of producer organisations, in which we have given up control over our product to the PO, on a one member/one vote basis, and therefore know first hand how difficult this can be, but it has been for the better overall.

However, we are now working in partnership with many small farmers to supply the Co-operative Food stores. This has been relatively easy to achieve, probably because the parties involved feel they have more control.

Working together in partnerships, co-operatives or any other way is absolutely essential if we are to compete with our continental neighbours and increase our share of fruit and vegetables eaten in the UK.

Consumers look out for British product, but we need to be competitive with continental supply in every respect, for the wholesale supply chain as well as our retailers, in order they can buy it.

■ *Christine Tacon is general manager of the 24,290-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms.*