

Institute for Food and Development Policy



Research Report #2

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# Land Reform: Is It the Answer?

**A Venezuelan Peasant Speaks**

**An interview with Carlos Rojas**

**by Frances Moore Lappé and Hannes Lorenzen**

**With an historical overview by Dr. Howard Handelman**

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by Frances Moore Lappe and Hannes Lorenzen

translated by Phil Pasmanick

With an historical overview by Dr. Howard Handelman

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## INTRODUCTION

As the 1980s begin, we increasingly hear calls for land reform as a solution to world hunger. The United States Agency for International Development (AID), the World Bank, and Carter's Presidential Commission on World Hunger all pay homage to need for land reform in the third world.

And who could be against it?

To most of us land reform means the redistribution of control over land and carries with it greater equity and greater access to food and income by the disenfranchised majority.

We offer this booklet to challenge the simple notion that land redistribution is, by itself, the solution. We focus on the history of land reform in Venezuela. Through Howard Handelman's thumbnail history, we learn the function of land reform nationally; and through one peasant's story, we learn how land reform affected the lives of people in a single village.

Their observations reveal a powerful truth about social reform: without a genuine redistribution of power, any "reform" can actually strengthen the oppressive forces and can result in new mechanisms of control of the many by the few.

For all who assert that land reform is a tool for combatting injustice and needless hunger, we recommend learning more about the history of land reform in such diverse countries as China, the U.S.S.R., Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Cuba, Bolivia, Mexico, and those in Eastern Europe. We suggest some resources at the end of this book for that purpose. (Please suggest others to us.)

We at the Institute are engaged in continuing study of land and other reforms. We are testing this hypothesis: Only when the transformation of the agrarian structure takes place under the overwhelming pressure of organized peasants will the changes favor them. Bureaucratic devices which simply parcel land will not help the

peasants establish their own power. The state and/or corrupt "peasant" unions will merely replace the paternalism and exploitation of the larger landholders. Since the development of any society is based on the development of the individuals within it, programs of redistribution must break patterns of dependency. The programs must provide a process for people themselves to take more and more control over their own lives. The process of land reform is, therefore, as important as the reform itself.

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## AGRARIAN REFORM IN VENEZUELA

In the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, governments throughout Latin America--encouraged by the U.S. and the Alliance for Progress--hastened to pass agrarian reform legislation. They sought to defuse peasant discontent and to lessen the threat of further revolution in the hemisphere. Venezuela's social democratic government was among the first to act, passing a national agrarian reform law in 1960. Indeed, the ruling Acción Democrática party had been elected in 1958 largely on the basis of peasant votes and the promise of rural change.

Virtually all of the Latin American agrarian reform laws passed in the 1960s, however, were largely cosmetic operations. They failed to alter the basic structure of rural land ownership or to modify highly unequal income distribution. Though more ambitious than programs in neighboring countries, Venezuela's rural development policies were no exception to this pattern.

Acción Democrática had first come to power in the late 1940s with a popular mandate for sweeping reform. In less than three years, however, its attempts at land redistribution and other progressive legislation had antagonized vested power groups. It was ousted in a 1948 military coup.

Ten years later, a popular uprising against the nation's military dictatorship paved the way for Acción Democrática's return to office. This time, however, the party leadership was determined to avoid antagonizing the landed elite. Therefore, during the next 14 years (1961-1974), Acción Democrática and the succeeding Social Christian administration left the nation's major private estates largely untouched by the reform. Government food policy was oriented toward increasing production on large commercial farms so as to "better feed" the growing urban population.

When Acción Democrática took office in 1959, some 5,000 latifundia (large estates) controlled nearly 80

percent of the country's cultivatable land.\* At the same time, 280,000 to 380,000 peasant families either lacked any land or had plots too small to support themselves. Malnutrition--primarily caloric deficiency--was widespread outside the nation's largest cities, and many villagers had average calorie intakes of only 1,500 to 1,800 daily.

When government land distribution came to an end in 1974, 150,000 to 180,000 families had received plots--less than half the number who were in need. More importantly, because of the government's commitment to stimulating large commercial farms, most of the land distributed to the peasantry was virgin, public property in relatively remote, unsettled areas. Only six percent of Venezuela's privately owned farmland was affected by the agrarian reform. Most of the public land settled by peasant "beneficiaries" was far from markets and lacked the necessary access roads and infrastructure.

Lappé and Lorenzen's interview of Carlos Rojas, a regional peasant spokesman, expresses very well the frustration felt by many Venezuelan peasants nearly two decades after the promulgation of the agrarian reform. No single village is ever typical of a whole nation, and Señor Rojas' rather idyllic picture of pre-reform land tenancy and nutritional conditions in Yaritagua must be viewed with caution.

But if Señor Rojas offers a somewhat rose-tinted image of pre-reform conditions in rural Venezuela (or perhaps depicts an atypically successful area), he is quite accurate in his analysis of how 20 years of rural development policy and billions of petro-dollars have failed to improve the lives of most Venezuelan peasants.

Over 80 percent of the affected peasants never received title to their plots, making it virtually impossible for them to secure commercial credit. Lacking adequate state credits or technical assistance as well, most were unable to compete commercially and nearly half were forced to give up farming. Abandoning their plots, they joined the flood of rural-to-urban migrants that the agrarian reform had been intended to stem. Thus, Venezuela's urban population rose from 50 percent in the mid-1950s to over 80 percent in 1978.

\*For a more extensive discussion of Venezuelan agrarian reform and government food policy see: Howard Handelman, "Scarcity Amidst Plenty in Oil-rich Venezuela," in Barbara Huddleston and Jon McLin, Political Investments in Food Production (Indiana University Press, 1979).

By 1974 the government terminated efforts at land distribution. In fact, the basic structure of ownership in the agricultural sector had never been seriously altered. In 1961, 2.2 percent of Venezuela's landholders controlled 78.8 percent of the cultivatable land. A decade later, 3.1 percent of the farm population owned 76.5 percent.

Since 1974, the government has poured billions of dollars from its greatly expanded oil wealth into the agricultural sector. During the first four years of the Carlos Andres Perez administration (Acción Democrática: 1974-1979), government- and state-supported credits to agriculture and food processing rose 560 percent with loans in 1977 alone exceeding \$2.34 billion. But, like public and private sector credit throughout the last two decades, the major beneficiaries have been agribusiness and large commercial farms.

The experience of the government's "Agriculture-Livestock Credit Fund," set up to channel state oil revenues into agriculture, is illustrative. Allegedly, small and medium-sized farms were afforded preferential access to certain credit programs. Yet, the first 5,000 loans extended by the agency (through early 1976) averaged \$90,000 each. These loans were not going to small-holding peasants! Indeed, the net effect of government policies in the 1960s and 1970s was to enhance the position of large landholders. From the early 1950s through the early 1970s, large estates (250 acres or more) increased their share of the agricultural market from 36 to 46 percent while small-holders (with under 50 acres) saw their share fall from 42 to 28 percent.

#### Production for whom?

The total output of Venezuelan agriculture has grown substantially in recent decades. From 1960 through the late 1970s total food production rose at an annual rate of over four percent, one of the strongest records in Latin America. By the late 1970s, Venezuelans averaged over 2,600 calories daily, far exceeding FAO minimum standards for calories and protein. But such figures--reflecting gross averages--can be quite deceptive. Food production gains have been most impressive in meat cattle--benefiting mostly well-to-do consumers--and sugar.

Overall production of subsistence crops (corn, rice, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cassava and pulses)--basic staples of lower-class diets--grew at the much lower rate of only 2.4 percent annually. Indeed, black bean, corn and cassava (yucca) production were all lower in the 1974-1976 period than in any year between 1966 and 1970.



Thus, while the large Venezuelan middle class (perhaps 25 percent of the population) enjoys an increasingly rich diet, statistics reveal that over 40 percent of the people still receive an inadequate level of calories. A 1977 survey of 560,000 Venezuelan schoolchildren by the National Institute of Nutrition showed that 46 percent had some level of calorie-protein deficiency, with nearly 10 percent suffering from severe deficiencies. Moreover, as Señor Rojas so correctly points out, an increasing proportion of the food consumed by the lower class (and Venezuelans in general) is junk food or refined cereals stripped of much of their nutritional value.

In all, the proportion of undernourished (calorie-deficient) Venezuelans has diminished somewhat over the past 15 years from about 55 to 45 percent. Given Venezuela's enormous oil-wealth, its atypically large per capita GNP (by far the highest in Latin America), and the billions of tax dollars invested in agriculture, this is hardly an impressive record. Other Latin American nations with more limited resources can only reduce malnutrition with a meaningful agrarian reform (including technical and credit assistance to peasant beneficiaries) and income policies aimed at alleviating bottom-line poverty.

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## A VENEZUELAN PEASANT SPEAKS

An interview with Carlos Rojas  
Village of Yaritagua  
State of Yaracui, July 1979

Tell us about yourself and your family. What was it like before the agrarian reform?

There are 16 in my family, and we live in the countryside. My grandmother and my parents have told me things were better 20 years ago. People grew their own food then; they had all kinds of animals and crops. They had no difficulty getting good nutrition.

People in my area worked their own plots, no bigger than a hectare. No one held a title to this land. We would cultivate an area, then let it rest while we planted another area. We could have planted more--there was plenty of land--but we were satisfied with one hectare. We had plenty to eat and all we needed was the seeds, which we produced ourselves anyway. And we grew a lot of different crops. Corn and beans grew together, and we raised dairy cattle, chickens, pigs. There were plenty of fish in the river, and we could find game in the woods. That was 20 or 30 years ago.

We were all in the same position then, and we had a real community. We shared everything. If I would have a good corn harvest, I'd share it with my neighbor. He'd share his excess beans or yucca or potatoes. We always exchanged our products within the village.

Most of these communities had from 30 to 40 families; a few big communities had 100 families.

What was the purpose of the agrarian reform?

In many parts of Venezuela big landholders controlled most of the land. In the 1960s the small farmers pressured the government to buy and redistribute lands that were not being cultivated.

Also, around 1958-1960, campesinos started getting thrown off their land by wealthier people who claimed to own the land. They also started demanding that the campesinos had to pay rent. This was happening in our area, too. Some of the campesinos who were being kicked off the land went to the city and agitated for a clear title to their lands. This helped cause the fall of Perez Jimenez--the dictatorship--and started the movement for agrarian reform.

In our area, some of the land belonged to the municipality and couldn't be touched by the big landholders, and those families stayed put, most of them anyway. The rest of the campesinos, those who had been thrown off their land and were being oppressed by the landholders, had to organize themselves into "struggle committees" with the aim of recovering their lands.

The big landholders continued to oppress the campesinos and occupy the campesinos' land. Then, as part of the agrarian reform, the big landholders got the government to pay them for land they claimed was theirs. The Minister of Agriculture then was Victor Jimenez Landines. He was the president at the Agricultural Reform Institute, and now he's president of the Fondo Nacional Agropecuario, the credit organization for small farmers. He was responsible for the land redistribution. Well, he is one of the biggest landholders, too. He, himself, is selling land to the government!

In our community, the reform did not mean a redistribution of land as much as a distribution of credit from the government for agricultural inputs. We saw the reform as an opportunity to get new technology and raise our production, so we were interested.

Did all the campesinos in your area participate in the credit program of the agrarian reform?

No. There are a few traditional peasants who saw that these organizations set up as part of the reform were just attempts to control their production. They did not participate. A few others got credit on their own through small business people in the area. (Of course they had to mortgage their harvests, too.)

Those who had been pushed off their land in the first place (a majority) were the most interested in these government credits. Now almost 100 percent of them are involved. It's been the same story all over Venezuela.

Overall, about 90,000 families--about 50 percent--participated in my area.

I thought you implied that almost everyone participated.

Yes, almost everyone with land. But there are still many people without any land, who didn't "benefit" at all from the agrarian reform. We are still struggling to get land for them.

In our district of 47,000 hectares, the land has never been legally sold. The original title-holder, the founder of the town, left it to the campesinos to work in peace and plenty. That was in 1672. So legally all the land must be ours. This history is very important in our struggle to regain our land.

Fifteen-thousand hectares are now in the hands of campesinos. Twelve-thousand five-hundred hectares are still being fought over. Most of the land is controlled by rich men who took it largely by pushing off more small-holders. We've been fighting for 67 years for this land.

Since 1900, municipal governments were supposed to be in charge of these land disputes, but the municipality has been doing nothing. They won't do anything, because they've sold themselves to the dominant classes. Now we have had to organize to fight for the return of our land.

What was the impact of the agrarian reform on your community?

The government offered us credits to buy new farming materials. The credit had to go through peasant organizations which we had formed to protect ourselves against the big landholders. But our organizations were reorganized by the state after the land redistribution. We had to distribute the credit and lay out our plots their way. We were expected to buy new fertilizers with our credits, and they sent technical experts whose instructions we had to follow.

The parcels of land (8-10 hectares per family) were free, and we saw this as a real opportunity. We were now working an area of 800 or 1,000 hectares per community.

Locally there are now two kinds of organizations to work through--the cooperative and the credit union. Originally we saw these organizations, and the credit we got, as a real change and an opportunity, not as imposed conditions.

The credit union works like this: the board of directors receives the whole of the credit and they distribute the credit to individual farmers. The payment is based on the individual's harvest profits and goes through the board, which is responsible to the bank. The board is also responsible to make sure that the credits are used to buy and use inputs according to government plans. The credit union's directorship is composed

of five people elected annually in a general assembly with 50 percent or more of members present.

If a family can't pay, the family loses its land to the credit union board and this land will pass to another family. In general, it is impossible to recover one's land.

You said that you work through two organizations. The first is the credit union. How is the cooperative different?

The cooperative works collectively and receives credit collectively. The income of the co-op is distributed according to the daily work of each person. There is a five-person board, as with the credit union, to supervise the expenditures.

These co-ops produce sugar cane almost exclusively, whereas the credit union to which my family belongs grows corn. Most workers rent machines from private equipment entrepreneurs. In both cases, production is controlled by state agricultural experts.

The workers used to have more influence but now the boards have more. The board distributes the inputs and supervises the application of them. All steps of production are decreed by government. The government technicians who used to really direct production now just hang around.

The so-called peasants' organization, the Federacion Campesina de Venezuela (now organized on a national level), is the link through which the government distributes credits to both the local co-ops and credit unions. Peasant leagues, peasant unions and other groups of agroworkers formed the Federation in 1960 and eventually were able to organize nationally. The Federation began as a real people's effort to protect their interests but since 1965 it has been controlled by the major parties. A lot of the directors were from the Perez Jimenez regime and were rapidly corrupted.

It's hard to say what the Federation does besides the bureaucratic chores. Now it's really just a device to confuse the people. Hardly anyone understands what exactly is going on with the credits.

Credit goes directly to private distributors of farming inputs, not to the workers. Peasants get the farm inputs, not money.

When the Federation receives a loan from the government, it places orders with the input dealers and with the government so that the government will pay the dealer. The order lists the items requested, but only the Federation knows the prices! If it costs 28 at the dealer's, they write down 30 for the government to pay, but the

credit union directors and the peasants are stuck with the larger debt. The kickback goes to the Federation. It averages six percent.

Let me give you another example of how the Federation operates. This year the government had to buy tons of beans (5,000,000 c.) from Mexico, because there are no beans on the market here. The Federation receives a commission to be used to motivate the campesinos to plant whatever crop is in short supply, in this case beans. Of course, none of this money ever gets to the farmers. The Federation is just another device to control us.

Do you eat the corn you grow?

The government controls what we do with our production. Those growing corn have to sell it to a nearby agro-industry, PROMASA, for processing.

Then we buy flour from PROMASA made from the corn that we sold to them. PROMASA won't make arepa,\* our national dish. Instead, they try to get us to eat white bread. The flour we buy from PROMASA has had the corn germ removed for use in oil, animal feeds, or beer. What they sell to us is the leftover junk, with no nutritive value. The animal feed is mostly exported, although some is used here. The beans we eat are imported from Mexico and India.

Who sets the price of corn and how much do you get?

The official price is .90 bolivar per kilo (U.S. \$.21), but after the kickbacks we get B.85. The state then sells the unprocessed corn to the agro-industry at B.50. The consumers--including us--then buy the nutritionally worthless flour at B2.00 per kilo. We pay more than twice as much for the flour as we got for our corn from which it was made.

Why don't you keep part of your corn production for yourselves?

Right now all our production goes to PROMASA. It's easier to make arepa with flour, of course, and most families haven't understood the loss of nutritive value. Advertising now says that white flour is better! Besides, many have forgotten the traditional technique. But we're trying to teach people about this, and more and more families are starting to make their arepa directly from the corn.

\*Arepa is like a thick tortilla, now made from corn flour, formerly made from cornmeal, frequently a breakfast bread.

Another problem is that the new seed varieties provided by the government don't store well. The grain becomes rotten or insect-ridden within a month or two, so we can't use it. Part of our program is to plant some areas with our traditional seeds to have a corn harvest we can keep and use.

What kind of income do you make from selling corn to PROMASA?

Our production is very high--among the highest in Venezuela--but our income is very low. About 50 percent of the credit union members have to work outside; their income isn't sufficient. Most work on the co-ops as wage laborers, cutting sugar cane. While the workers are away, their women and old people tend the plots.

During the five-month corn season everybody works at their plots. Most farmers get only B8,000-8,300 (about \$1,900) from their harvests; in our area the average income is B4,663 per year from a 4.5 hectare plot.

Can you live on this income?

No. It's less than half of what we need to get adequate nutrition. Last year we did our own study of diet, along with the German investigators who were in our area. We found that 52 percent of the children between one and six years of age and 43 percent of those from seven to 14 years of age were malnourished. We also found that where government investment in credits, inputs and expertise was highest, the nutritional level was lowest! The main problems were unemployment and low prices for our products.

Then we had to figure out what nutrition we needed. We surveyed 15 families in our region, and made a list of the foods we have traditionally grown and consumed--beans, corn, rice, tomatoes, potatoes, onion, garlic, coffee, chicken, meat, milk, eggs, port, butter, oil and sugar. Then we went to the National Nutrition Institute and got a description of a minimally adequate diet. We went back to the 15 families and found that by buying their food for cash, only one was able to reach this minimum level of nutrition.

This family had to work especially hard. The man cut sugar cane and had a small business selling lunches to the other cane cutters. His wife made the lunches and took in washing, and they also had a very small plot to grow a little food. Anyway, we found that, based on the diet of the old-time subsistence farmers, a basic level of nutrition costs B5.75 per person per day.

At this point we started to examine the life of the traditional peasants. We saw that their children were better nourished than ours. Our children suffer from

impaired eyesight, big bellies, and deformed bones. Death rates are very high due to malnutrition. But the children of the traditional peasants didn't exhibit these signs.

When we saw that the subsistence farmers' children were healthier, we decided to do subsistence farming on our land. We calculated that we could raise enough food --based on the National Institute of Nutrition's figures --on just 47.5 hectares for the 1,000 people in our credit union.

The traditional family needs half a hectare to produce enough food, but by sowing 8.5 hectares with beans, 14 with corn, etc., we could collectively grow all we need on one small plot of 47.5 hectares.

What we realized was that all the new techniques, the agricultural extension, and the credits, were not really any good for us. The whole agrarian reform and the increase in production didn't help us! What we needed was those 47.5 hectares which would cover our nutritional problems. The rest of the land could be used for production for trade, or could be sold at cost to landless people in the community.

We started an experimental subsistence program last year with one family that has 24 children. They have five hectares: four for corn, and on the other, various crops. We were able to feed the family for three months.

We started this experiment a year ago. Half of the farmers are actively part of our discussions. There are others who don't really understand, but who do participate.

What are the other most serious problems your family faces?

I can't just answer about my own family. I'll tell you about our farm families in general.

Besides the nutrition problem there's the question of health. But of course we can't improve our health until we improve our diet. Then, there's housing. Most farm families live in houses that are really bad--huts, really. Luckily it doesn't get cold here, but during the rainy season houses flood or collapse because there's no drainage. We build choras, huts made from materials we find in the countryside, like palm fronds. The palm fronds attract bugs, but there's another material to keep the bugs out. We also gather wood and vines. We don't need to buy nails or anything. But now we can hardly find these materials, due to the brutal deforestation of almost all the jungle areas of our district by certain landholders.



Our public services--transportation, sanitation, light, and water--are poor. Our water, for example, comes in tank trucks, in terrible condition, and a lot of it gets illegally diverted.

Education is another problem. All the methods must be changed. We have six years in primary school, then a three-year "basic cycle," then we can choose humanities, sciences, or teachers college. But in our area, which is agricultural, there are no technical or agronomy schools. Also, we need to collect, organize, and develop our traditional peasant culture and values. We're losing traditional childraising, music, folklore, and so on. There are the traditional crafts of the women--shoes, hammocks and weaving--and the traditional architecture. All is being lost.

Can you tell us more about that experimental subsistence farm? Why haven't more families followed the example?

We've had very good results. One family was able to grow all it needed of many foods and, remember, they have 24 children! The experiment was successful.

But we have to move slowly. The young people now don't know how to run a subsistence farm. They don't have the experience, and they need to learn a great deal. If we all jumped in and started subsistence farms, we'd have to break with the system. To do that, we need a firm base.

We need to know what we're doing so we won't have problems later. We're analyzing the soil and studying crop rotation, crop association, and animal raising, including the best way to use manure on our fields. We're trying to convince those of us who still aren't sure. And we're continuing a campaign to have three more wells drilled--we have three now--so we'll be self-sufficient in water. We're also trying to have some sort of irrigation equipment set up. Of course, this water business is very expensive so we want to get it taken care of before we break from the government credit system.

When we're ready, we'll ask for a five-year credit from the government, payable in cash and crops. When we pay that back, we'll be free of this credit system.

We are now discussing plans for the rest of the land--that is, the 650 hectares left after we have met our own needs. Some would like to maintain the status quo by continuing to sell corn to PROMASA. Another plan is to create a co-op to sell food at low prices to poor workers and other marginal sectors of the country. A third plan is to trade with other farming communities in the area. We can't grow rice here, for example, but there are excellent rice crops grown just an hour away. We could

trade corn for rice. And contact with other groups is an important result, too.

What contacts have you made with other groups?

We have connections with all 40 credit unions in the state of Araqui. We meet informally with those who understand the problem a little better. And we meet formally with groups in our area. We also have contacts with various middle-level and high-level technical organizations who want to participate in the new possibilities in the country. University students, including those from the agriculture school, and our state university's technical students meet with us.

Some conversations have been held with other farm groups in other states, such as those in Zona Portuguesa. They had analyzed their problems and have come up with some ideas identical to ours. With them it has been easy. Now we're building an organization that will permit us to maintain communications in the center-west section of our country which is the most important area for agriculture.

How much do women participate in the organization?

At first it was very hard, due to the attitudes in Venezuela towards women. We just didn't want to listen to them. Even though they had the same duties, they didn't have equal rights. They couldn't participate in discussions and have their ideas recognized. But, as we went on talking, we saw that women showed more capacity to analyze the situation, and that their suggestions were often the best. For example, the proposal to create ties with other farm villages was made by one of our women. She's 45, very active in the movement, and has had experience as a traditional peasant with the old-style, informal exchange system, which is a system based on mutual gifts.

Now women's opinions are respected and their participation is accepted. They have been more active than the men. I think it's because the women must return home and feed their children. When they realize how little they have to feed their children, they feel the problem more acutely than the men who spend most of their time working away from home. As soon as a situation is perceived as a problem to these women, they get involved.

Many people living in poverty in the countryside want to move to the city. Would you consider this option for yourself?

No. I want nothing to do with the city. My problem is the problem of my people. Besides, I know several people who took this route, and had to return to the

country. There's a saying we use, "A good boy returns home."

The country is a better place to be. We're trying to help some companeros who live in towns to come back so that all can live in the farm's villages. We're working on housing for them. No, I don't want anything to do with working in industry. I'll stay in the country, and there I'll die, with my people.

Carlos Rojas, 28, a peasant from the village of Yaritagua in Venezuela, has been a political activist from an early age. Like his father, Carlos was active in political parties for a number of years. Recently he retreated from party activities to concentrate on independent community organizing with the peasants in his cooperative and in nearby villages. In 1979, sociology students from the University of Bielefeld in West Germany who were working in his village suggested his name to the Rome Declaration Group, an international network of scholars and activists concerned with agrarian problems. The Rome Declaration Group sponsored a separate documentation center and presentation on agrarian conflict during the U.N. World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in July 1979. Rojas was brought to Rome by the Rome Declaration Group to present information on the impact of agrarian reform in Venezuela. There he met Lappé and Lorenzen.

Frances Moore Lappé is a co-founder of the Institute for Food and Development Policy and author of Diet for a Small Planet, Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity, Mozambique and Tanzania: Asking the Big Questions, What Can We Do? Food and Hunger: How You Can Make a Difference, and Aid as Obstacle: Twenty Questions about Our Foreign Aid and the Hungry.

Hannes Lorenzen is a recent graduate in sociology of the University of Bielefeld in West Germany. He has investigated and written about a World Bank agricultural project in Mexico and is a founder of the Dritte Welt Haus (Third World House) in Bielefeld.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for Food and Development Policy is a not-for-profit research, documentation and education center, based in San Francisco. It focuses on food and agriculture, always asking: Why hunger in a world of plenty?

By working to identify the root causes of hunger and food problems here and abroad, the Institute counters the conventional wisdom by showing that:

- \* No country in the world is a hopeless basket case.
- \* The illusion of scarcity is a product of the unequal control over food-producing resources; inequality in control over these resources results in their underuse and misuse.
- \* The hungry are not our enemies. Rather, we and they are victims of the same economic forces which are undercutting their food security as well as ours.

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*"Things were better 20 years ago. People grew their own food. They had all kinds of animals and crops."*

*—Carlos Rojas*

In this first-hand account, Venezuelan peasant leader Carlos Rojas tells how 20 years of "land reform" have left the people of his village, Yaritagua, with less control over their own lives—and more hunger.

Rojas' moving testimony from the Venezuelan countryside shatters the myth that land reform in itself is the answer to poverty and hunger. It shows how cosmetic land reform, imposed from above, without peasant control, can actually worsen the lives of the people. Dr. Howard Handelman of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee contributes an historical overview.

With government loans and new farming techniques, the land reform allows the peasants to grow more corn. But they are forced to sell their corn to a factory, then buy it back at twice the price as processed white flour. They must import the beans that they once grew.

"Where government investment in credits, inputs, and expertise is the highest, the nutritional level of our people is the lowest," Rojas explains in this interview. "Now half of our children are malnourished."

But the people of Yaritagua are fighting back. Rojas describes how by regaining control over their farming—growing corn, beans, and vegetables to assure themselves of enough to eat—they are also gaining power over their own lives.

The Institute's Research Report Series publishes critical studies and interviews about food, hunger and democratic control. These timely reports make vital research available to people outside technical and academic circles, especially activists around the world who are working for social change.

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