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Photo: Ralf Leonard

The launching of the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform at the former site of the Regional Center for Military Training (CREM) in Honduras.

Tides Shift on Agrarian Reform: New Movements Show the Way

BY PETER ROSSET, PH.D., CO-DIRECTOR OF FOOD FIRST

From Killing Fields to Fields of Dreams?

Only rarely are we privileged to bear personal witness at historical turning points that symbolize and crystallize a changing of the tides. For decades the very phrase 'Central America' conjured up images of poverty, destitution, and the most hideous military repression; of dirty wars, the CIA, genocide, torture, and growing landlessness in dirt poor rural areas. The end of the armed struggles of the 1980s meant an end to war, but also, ironically, to short-term prospects of installing radical pro-poor governments—the end of a certain kind of hope.

Yet in Central America at the dawn of the new millennium, and indeed across most of the Third World, we are seeing the emergence of a new source of hope, of new dreams—those of the largely non-violent poor people's movements who sidestep government inaction and take matters firmly into their own hands. In Honduras, home to many dynamic organizations of landless peasants struggling for land, I witnessed a moment that signifies a turning of the tides of landlessness.

On July 26, 2000, I was one of fifty visitors from 24 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas to visit the 5000 hectare site of the former Regional Center for Military Training (CREM) in Colón,

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Honduras. During the 1980s the notorious CREM was used by the US military to train the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran militaries in counter-insurgency, and the Nicaraguan *contras* in counter-revolution. Here was where some of the world's worst violators of human rights learned their craft on the US taxpayers' tab. The CREM was reportedly the site of a secret prison for 'disappeared' activists from Central America, and contains a recently discovered clandestine mass grave where some of those political prisoners presumably ended up—and for which five former military officers, including former Honduran vice president General Walter López, were charged in 1998.[1]

With the end of the Cold War, this killing field was vacated by the US and Honduran armies, and in 1991 the Honduran Congress voted to make it available for distribution to landless peasants, whose numbers swelled over years of economic crisis and land grabs by the wealthy. The property transfer never happened, as titles to the land mysteriously appeared in the hands of military officers, politicians, and landlords—titles the government refused to annul despite multiple protests and legal challenges by peasant organizations.

In early 2000 the landless members of the Peasant Movement of Aguán decided to take matters into their own hands.

In early 2000 the landless members of the Peasant Movement of Aguán decided to take matters into their own hands. Some 900 families—more than 4000 men, women, and children—occupied the land and immediately planted crops, built ramshackle homes of cardboard, tin, palm leaves, and scavenged wood, and erected a modest schoolhouse, community center, and communal kitchen. They came into immediate conflict with the hired thugs of the landlords: one of their leaders was killed, and they had to organize nightly self-defense patrols to ward off snipers who would fire pot shots into the makeshift community under the cover of darkness. The peasants declared they would never be dragged off the land alive. When you have no land, you have nothing. With land, you have something to live for, and, paradoxically, something to die for.

Photo: J.R. Ripper/Impact Visuals.

For the landless movement in Brazil it has been an uphill battle against landlord and government violence.

I had been invited to Honduras by La Via Campesina, the worldwide alliance of organizations of small farmer farmers and the landless, to address the First Global Congress of Landless Peasants' Movements—an historic coming together of the new generation of rural poor people's movements making their mark from Brazil to Thailand to South Africa. On that sweltering hot July day, all of us paid a visit to the former CREM to express our moral support for the new community's struggle to have the Honduran government recognize their right to the land.

When we arrived at the huge encampment, some 700 primary school children in homemade uniforms, arranged in parade formation, greeted us by singing the Honduran national anthem. There was not one dry eye in the house. We visited the clandestine cemetery and the humble homes of several families, and met with leaders in the new community center, where we heard how hard times were. Since their first crop hadn't reached harvest yet, they were living off meager food donations from churches in nearby communities composed of peasants nearly as poor as they. But the spirit of the children and the solid determination of their parents made believers of all of us.

These fields, fertilized with the blood of countless other Central American peasants, were now truly transmogrified into fields of dreams, where the lives and aspirations of the children before us might prosper through the daily hard work of farm families. As an American citizen I felt moved and honored to be with these peasants as they took the worst kind of US-sponsored killing fields as the starting point for the life-giving cycle of planting, harvesting, and the raising of children.

The participants of the Landless Congress took advantage of the opportunity to unfurl the banner of a new Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform. The campaign is coordinated by La Via Campesina[2] and the FoodFirst Information Action Network (FIAN)[3]—the international human rights group focused on the right to food, of which Food First is a member. The purpose of the campaign is to build cooperation among landless movements and those who support them, to bring effective pressure to bear in favor of land redistribution and agrarian reform around the world, and to rapidly mobilize international pressure when emergency situations arise where the right to land is threatened.[4]

Land Reform: The Time Has Come (Again)

At Food First we have argued for twenty-five years that access to farm land is a fundamental human right for rural peoples (see BOX), and that grossly inequitable distribution of land is one the most common underlying causes of poverty and destitution in much of the world.[5] The re-distribution of land through comprehensive agrarian reform is a basic prerequisite for the kind of inclusive, broad-based development that would allow nations to provide all of their citizens with a decent standard of living, and make possible more ecologically-sustainable management of natural resources. What is at stake is a model of development that is inclusive, rather than exclusive. Yet for many years it felt as though Food First was one of only a few voices crying in the wilderness. That is now changing, as landless movements across the Third World, and highly visible land conflicts in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Indonesia, and elsewhere, force land reform back to the center stage.

In the immediate post-World War II period, there was a flurry of land reform efforts across the Third World, some more successful than others. But by the 1970s and 1980s, as entrenched landholding elites allied with transnational corporations resisted further re-distribution, land reform became taboo in official development circles—one would be labeled a 'communist' or 'stuck-in-the-past' if they raised land reform as a serious option.

The 1990s saw the coming of age of the new generation of well-organized movements of landless peasants and rural workers. While the landless have always engaged in takeover of idle lands, there has been a qualitative change in the organization and political savvy of contemporary groups. An undisputed leader of this struggle is Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST).[6] We will read more about them later.

The Times They Are A-Changin'

There are many signs of change. Landless movements are bringing land reform to national and international policy debates—even as they seize, occupy, and plant idle lands—often at a tremendous cost of lives lost and arbitrary arrests. At the opposite end of the spectrum, even economists at the World Bank are finally accepting a key point that Food First has been making for decades. Bank economists have concluded that extremely inequitable access to productive resources like land prevents economic growth, and the Bank is now placing its version of land reform at the center of the policy packages it pushes on Third World governments.[7]

Access to farm land is a fundamental human right for rural peoples, and grossly inequitable distribution of land is one the most common underlying causes of poverty and destitution in much of the world.

While what the Bank calls land reform—essentially privatization, the promotion of markets in land, and 'market-led' mechanisms of redistribution[8]—is a far cry from what La Via Campesina, Food First, and others call for, the change in Bank policy is making it 'legitimate' again to call for land reform and to struggle over its definition. At least we are beginning to reach agreement that there is a problem to be addressed.

The Problem: Land Concentration

Around the world, the poorest of the poor are the landless in rural areas, followed closely by the land-poor, those whose poor quality plots are too small support a family. They make up the majority of the rural poor and hungry, and it is in rural areas where the worst poverty and hunger are found. The expansion of agricultural production for export, controlled by wealthy elites who own the best lands, continually displaces the poor to ever more marginal areas for farming. They are forced to fell forests located on poor soils, to farm thin, easily eroded soils on steep slopes, and to try to eke out a living on desert margins and in rainforests. As they fall deeper into poverty, and despite their comparatively good soil management practices, they are often accused of contributing to environmental degradation.[9]

But the situation is often worse on the more favorable lands. The better soils are concentrated into large holdings used for mechanized, pesticide, and chemical fertilizer-intensive monocultural production for export. Many of our planet's best soils—which had earlier been sustainably managed for millennia by pre-colonial traditional agriculturalists—are today being rapidly degraded, and in some cases abandoned completely, in the short term pursuit of export profits and competition. The productive capacity of these soils is dropping rapidly due to soil compaction, erosion, waterlogging, and fertility loss, together with growing resistance of pests to pesticides and the loss of biodiversity.[10]

The products harvested from these more fertile lands flow overwhelmingly toward consumers in wealthy countries. Impoverished local majorities cannot afford to buy what is grown, and because they are not a significant market, national elites essentially see local people as a labor source—a cost of production to be minimized by keeping wages down and busting unions. The overall result is a downward spiral of land degradation and deepening poverty in rural areas. Even urban problems have rural origins, as the poor must abandon the countryside in massive numbers, migrating to cities where only a lucky few make a

living wage, while the majority languish in slums and shanty towns.[11]

If present trends toward greater land concentration and the accompanying industrialization of agriculture continue unabated, it will be impossible to achieve social or ecological sustainability. On the other hand, our research at Food First shows the potential that could be achieved by re-distribution. Small farmers are more productive, more efficient, and contribute more to broad-based regional development than do the larger corporate farmers who hold the best land. Small farmers with secure tenure can also be much better stewards of natural resources, protecting the long term productivity of their soils and conserving functional biodiversity on and around their farms.[12]

Photo: Fred Phillips/Impact Visuals.

Tension rises in Zimbabwe as landless war veterans confront white landowners.

Only by changing development tracks from the large farm/land concentration/displacement of peoples/industrialization model can we stop the downward spiral of poverty, low wages, rural-urban migration, and environmental degradation.[13] Re-distributive land reform holds the promise of change toward a smaller farm, family- or cooperative-based model, with the potential to feed the poor, lead to broad-based economic development, and conserve biodiversity and productive resources.[14]

Historical Lessons

History shows that the re-distribution of land to landless and land-poor rural families is a very effective way to improve rural welfare. Dozens of land reform programs were carried out after WW II. In looking back at the successes and failures, we can distinguish between what might be called 'genuine' land reforms, and the more 'window dressing' or even 'fake' reforms.[15]

When a significant proportion of quality land was really distributed to a majority of the rural poor, with policies favorable to successfully family farming in place and the power of rural elites to distort and 'capture' policies was broken, the results have invariably been real, measurable poverty reduction and improvement in human welfare.[16] The economic successes of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China resulted from such reforms.[17] Even the felling of fragile forests has been slowed, as happened during the 1980s with the now-aborted Sandinista land reform in Nicaragua.[18]

In contrast, when 'reforms' gave only poor quality land to poor families and failed to support them with favorable polices, credits, and access to markets, or failed to alter the rural power structures that work against the poor, land reform failed. Mexico and the Philippines are typical cases of such failure.[19]

The more successful reforms triggered relatively broad-based economic development. By including the poor in economic development, they built domestic markets to support national economic activity.[20] The often tragic outcome of failed reforms was to condemn the 'beneficiaries' to even worse poverty, as they frequently assumed heavy debts to pay for the poor quality land they received, in remote locations without credit or access to markets, and in policy environments hostile to small farmers.[21]

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The World Bank: Repeating the Errors?

Today the World Bank is taking the lead in promoting, and in some cases financing, comprehensive reforms of land tenure. This includes titling, registries, land market facilitation, market-led redistribution and credit, technical assistance, and marketing support. Governments and aid agencies are following the lead of the Bank, aggressively implementing some or all of these reforms. From South Africa, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Columbia, and Brazil, to the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and countless others, various combinations of these reforms are either being carried out or their possible implementation is a hot topic of national debate.[22]

While we at Food First applaud the fact that thanks in part to the Bank it is no longer taboo to propose land reform as a key element in sustainable development, we have serious concerns about specific elements in these so-called reform packages. Relying on land privatization and free market forces may well be a repeat of the main errors of the failed reforms of the past, and is fast bringing civil society into conflict with the Bank.[23] Concerns include:

- When communal lands are privatized, as in Mexico and many places in Africa and Asia, increased individual competition can cause the breakdown of community-based resource management systems like terraces and small-scale irrigation, leading to accelerated land degradation. The introduction of the individual profit motive—sometimes linked with outside corporations—can produce a new short term emphasis on extraction-like profit taking, to the exclusion of other concerns. Individualism can also come into sharp conflict with indigenous land use systems, and new problems may arise with the land claims of women and indigenous communities, who are often left out of the process.[24]
- Land titling, registries, and facilitation of land markets all seem to meet the demands of farmers for secure title to their land. Yet in today's free market macroeconomic environments this can induce mass sell-offs of land, causing increased landlessness, land concentration, and rural-urban migration. This 're-concentration' of land is occurring rapidly today in many parts of the world.[25]

Landless movements are bringing land reform to national and international policy debates—even as they seize, occupy, and plant idle lands—often at a tremendous cost of lives lost and arbitrary arrests.

- Market-led redistribution—the current favorite land reform policy at the Bank—seeks to overcome elite resistance to agrarian reforms by offering credit to landless or land poor farmers to buy land at market rates from wealthy landowners. This is fraught with risks. Landowners often choose to sell only the most marginal, most remote, and most ecologically fragile plots that they own (steep slopes, rainforests, desert margins, etc.), many of which may not presently be in production, and they are often sold at exorbitant prices. Selling these lands can easily lead to extending the agricultural frontier, deforestation, desertification, and soil erosion, as well as the introduction of unsustainable practices—such as pesticide use—into fragile habitats.[26]
- Such programs also set up 'beneficiary' families for failure. They are saddled with heavy debts at high interest rates from the land purchase itself, while finding themselves on poor soils with little access to markets. This can actually deepen poverty and land degradation, much like the failed reforms of earlier decades. Such appears to be the case with the hotly disputed market-led

Land Reform and Human Rights

By Anuradha Mittal, co-director of Food First

Land reform is not merely a policy for rural development, any more than the right to live without torture is a policy for democracy. Freedom from want and freedom from fear are both fundamental human rights.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),[1] adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, established that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [herself] and of his [her] family, including food, clothing, housing....." This has been legally codified in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,[2] and can be interpreted as meaning that all people have the inalienable human right to be able to feed themselves, through work with dignity and a living wage, or through access to the land.[3]

When faced with unequal and unjust distribution of farm land, the call for redistribution through true land reform is a call for the human right to feed oneself. It is not a call for charity or for benevolence from people in power, but rather a demand that all governments respect and uphold their obligations as spelled out in international treaties on the universal rights of humankind. This call challenges the arbitrary and artificial division between economic/social and political/civil rights, despite attempts by the American and other governments to recognize only the latter, because almost every plantation owned by wealthy absentee landowners while those nearby go hungry has been cultivated with the blood and sweat of the landless. Virtually every struggle by the landless for the economic human right to land has been met with brutal repression and violence, which constitutes clear violations of civil and political rights.

In the 21st century, as the language and discourse of human rights gain prominence at official levels, unless true land reform is implemented, the calls to respect basic human rights will be shallow at best.

1. *www.foodfirst.org/progs/humanrts/UDHR.html*
2. *www.foodfirst.org/progs/humanrts/ICESCR.html*
3. *www.foodfirst.org/progs/humanrts/conduct.html*

Take Action: Support the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform. Bring pressure to bear in emergency situations where the right to land is under attack. Visit our Web site at *www.foodfirst.org/action/gcar.*

reform in Brazil, which the Bank is actively trying to replicate in the Philippines and elsewhere. In such 'reforms,' there is also a very real likelihood that the parcels sold by landowners will be those which are in dispute, most likely from indigenous peoples' land claims, turning indigenous people into a second set of potential losers, and setting the poor against the poor.[27]

- The Bank usually accompanies these reforms with packages for the new land holders that include production credit, technical assistance for new, marketable crops, and sometimes assistance in marketing. While these support services are essential to successful land reform, Bank-supported packages are often based on pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and non-traditional export crops. In our research on the promotion of similar packages by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Central America during the 1980s and early 1990s, we found them to intensify land degradation and ecological problems, while leaving poor farmers in risky enterprises with high failure rates.[28]

There Are Better Ways

Rather than following the World Bank's market-based approach, policy makers should learn from the successes and failures of the post-WW II period. A set of useful principles might include the following:

- When families receive land they must not be saddled with heavy debt burdens. This can be accomplished by government expropriation of idle lands, with or without compensation for former owners.[29]
- Women must have the right to hold title to land. When titles are vested exclusively to male heads-of-household, domestic disputes or the premature death of a spouse inevitably lead to the destitution of women and children.[30]
- The land distributed must be of good quality, rather than ecologically fragile soils which should never be farmed, and it must be free of disputed claims by other poor people.[31]
- People need more than land if they are to be successful. There must also be a supportive policy environment and essential services like credit on reasonable terms, infrastructure, support for ecological sound technologies, and access to markets.[32]

The often tragic outcome of failed reforms was to condemn the 'beneficiaries' to even worse poverty, as they frequently assumed heavy debts to pay for the poor quality land they received, in remote locations without credit or access to markets, and in policy environments hostile to small farmers.

Photo: Maria Elena Martínez

The land issue is central to the Zapatista indigenous uprising in Chiapas, Mexico.

- The power of rural elites to distort and capture policies, subsidies, and windfall profits in their favor must be effectively broken by the reforms.[33]
- The vast majority of the rural poor must be beneficiaries of the reform process.[34]
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, successful reforms are distinguished from failed ones by a motivation and perception that the new small family farms which are created are to be the centerpiece of economic development, as was the case in Japan, Taiwan, China, and Cuba. When land reform is seen as 'welfare' or as a charitable policy for the indigent, failure has been the inevitable result.[35]

Unfortunately, if we just write policy papers, even with the facts on our side, we will wait a long time for policy makers to act. That is why it is so very important that movements and organizations of the poor and landless take matters into their own hands, both to achieve concrete results for their members in the short term, and to push the policy process along.

Land Reform From Below

More Have Died in Land Struggle than at Dictators' Hands

The number of Brazilians who have died fighting for land reform since the country returned to democracy 15 years ago is four times the number who were officially disappeared during the two-decade-long authoritarian military regime (1964– 1985), according to figures provided by the Catholic Church.

—EFE news agency wire report,
September 6, 2000

Brazil and the MST are a case in point. While large landowners in Brazil on the average leave more than half of their land idle, 25 million peasants struggle to survive in temporary agricultural jobs. Founded in 1985, the MST organizes landless workers to occupy idle lands, using a clause in the Brazil constitution to legalize their claims, though they must defend themselves against the hired thugs of the landowners and government security forces. Today more than 250,000 families have won title to over 15 million acres of land seized through MST-led takeovers, a veritable reform from below.[36]

The impact on government coffers of legalizing MST-style land occupations-*cum*-settlements, versus the cost of services used by equal numbers of people migrating to urban areas is startling. When the landless poor

occupy land and force the government to legalize their holdings, it implies costs: compensation of the former landowner, legal expenses, credit for the new farmers, etc. Nevertheless, the total cost to the state to maintain the same number of people in an urban shanty town—including the services and infrastructure they use—is twelve times the cost of legalizing land occupations. Another way of looking at it is in terms of the cost of creating a new job. Estimates of the cost of creating a job in the commercial sector of Brazil range from two to twenty times more than the cost of establishing an unemployed head of household on farm land through agrarian reform.[37]

Land reform farmers in Brazil have an annual income equivalent to 3.7 minimum wages, while still landless laborers average only 0.7 of the minimum. Infant mortality among families of beneficiaries has dropped to only half of the national average.[38] When the movement began in the mid-1980s, the mostly conservative mayors of rural towns were violently opposed to MST land occupations in surrounding areas. However, in recent times their attitude has changed. Most of their towns are very depressed economically, and occupations can give local economies a much needed boost. Typical occupations consist of 1000 to 3000 families, who turn idle land into productive farms. They sell their produce in the marketplaces of the local towns and buy their supplies from local merchants. Not surprisingly, those towns with nearby MST settlements are now better off economically than other similar towns, and some mayors now actually petition the MST to carry out occupations near their towns.[39]

This provides a powerful argument that land reform to create a small farm economy is not only good for local economic development, but is also more effective social policy than allowing business-as-usual to keep driving the poor out of rural areas and into burgeoning cities. It also demonstrates that while policy makers dither, social movements can show the way.

NOTES

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