

## CHAPTER 16: CONCLUSION

# Moving Forward: Agrarian Reform as a Part of Food Sovereignty

*Peter Rosset*

Food sovereignty implies the implementation of radical processes of comprehensive agrarian reform adapted to the conditions of each country and region, which will provide peasant and indigenous farmers—with equal opportunities for women—with equitable access to productive resources, primarily land, water, and forests, as well as the means of production, financing, training, and capacity building for management and interlocation.

Agrarian reform, above all, should be recognized as an obligation of national governments . . . within the framework of human rights and as an efficient public policy to combat poverty. These agrarian reform processes must be controlled by peasant organizations . . . and must guarantee both individual and collective rights of producers over shared lands, and be articulated within coherent agricultural and trade policies. We oppose the policies and programs for the commercialization of land promoted by the World Bank instead of true agrarian reforms by governments.

— *Final Declaration, World Forum on Food Sovereignty, Havana, Cuba, September 7, 2001 (civil society preparatory meeting for World Food Summit +5)*

The right to food is a human right that is protected by international law. It is the right to have regular, permanent, and unobstructed access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and ensuring a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free from anxiety. Governments have a legal obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food . . .

While the Special Rapporteur believes that international cooperation is fundamental, the primary obligation to realize the right to food rests with national governments. At this level, access to land is fundamental, and agrarian reform must be a key part of government strategies aimed at reducing hunger. In many parts of the world, people are struggling to survive because they are landless or because their properties are so small that they cannot make a decent living. Agrarian

reform must be just, fair, and transparent . . . [and] more attention should be paid to the alternative models proposed by civil society, particularly the concept of food sovereignty. Access to land and agrarian reform, in particular, must be key elements of the right to food.

—Jean Ziegler, *Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the Right to Food*, 2002

## Introduction: A Rural World in Crisis

At the start of the new millennium we find the rural world everywhere to be in a state of crisis. The historical origins of this crisis, in the nations of the South, can be found in colonial land grabs and in the displacement of farming peoples from fertile lands with adequate rainfall, toward steep, rocky slopes; desert margins; and infertile rainforest soils; and the progressive incorporation of these displaced peoples into poorly paid seasonal labor forces for export agriculture. As a result of this legacy, only slightly modified in the postcolonial period, the landless and near-landless have long made up the poorest of the poor. In recent decades, neoliberal economic policies have typically made the conditions in rural areas even worse, as national governments, often with urging from international financial institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO), have:

- Presided over a set of trade, macroeconomic, and sectoral policies that have conspired to undercut the economic viability of peasant, small, and family farmers and cooperative/collective agriculture. These policies have included trade liberalization and the subsequent flooding of local markets with dumped, cheap food imports, against which local farmers can scarcely compete; cutting of price supports and subsidies for food producers; the privatization of credit, commercialization, and technical assistance; excessive export promotion; the patenting of crop genetic resources; and a bias in agricultural research toward expensive technologies such as genetic engineering. Increasingly, smaller and poorer farmers find that credit is inadequate or too expensive to cover rising production costs, buyers are more scarce and monopsonist than ever, and prices are too low to cover credit and production costs (Hellinger, Hansen-Kuhn, and Fehling 2001; Lappé et al. 1998). The net result has been a significant and continued deterioration in the access of the poor to land, as they are forced to sell off land they own, cannot afford land rentals or

similar arrangements, or lose land by defaulting on credit (European Commission 1999; Rosset 2001a; Ziegler 2002).

- Dragged their feet in implementing already existing land reform and land redistribution policies, and by and large resisted—sometimes using force—efforts by civil society organizations, such as movements of the landless, to push the implementation of these policies (Langevin and Rosset 1997; Agencia EFE 2000; Rosset 2001a; Ziegler 2002).
- Stood by as land has increasingly been commercialized, and watched passively as business interests—both agricultural (i.e., plantations) and nonagricultural (i.e., petroleum and mining)—and large infrastructure projects (i.e., hydroelectric dams) have encroached on communal and public lands and territories of indigenous peoples (Bryant 1998; European Commission 1999; Rosset 2001a).
- Done nothing as agricultural commodity chains—on both the input (i.e., seeds) and output (i.e., grain trading) sides—have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of very few transnational corporations, which, by virtue of their near-monopoly status, are increasingly setting costs and prices unfavorable to farmers, putting all, especially the poorest, in an untenable cost-price squeeze, thus further encouraging the abandonment of agriculture (ETC Group 2001; Heffernan 1999; Rosset 2001a; Ziegler 2004).

As we saw in part II of this volume, governments and multilateral institutions have taken up only one policy initiative on a more or less global scale, which they have presented as a positive step to redress land access issues. This initiative, or series of initiatives, consists of accelerating, building upon, and featuring World Bank–designed and supported policies to title lands, facilitate land markets, and, increasingly, to promote “land-bank” credit for land purchases by the poor. This is so-called market-assisted or negotiated land reform (Deininger 2001). Unfortunately, as is detailed in this volume, there is mounting evidence that these policies are unlikely to significantly improve access by the poor to land or give them more secure tenure. In fact there is good reason to believe these policies will actually worsen the situation in many cases.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that it is in rural areas where the worst poverty and hunger are still to be found. The expansion of agricultural production for export, controlled by wealthier producers 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 (Lappé et al. 1998).

But the situation is often worse on the most favorable lands. The better soils of most countries have been concentrated into large holdings used for mechanized, pesticide-laden, and chemical fertilizer–intensive monocultural production for export. Many of our planet’s best soils—which had earlier been sustainably managed for millennia by precolonial 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 (Lappé et al. 1998; Pingali, Hossain, and Gerpacio 1997).

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, the elite classes essentially see local people as a labor source—a cost of production to be minimized by keeping wages down and breaking up 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 and migrate to cities, where only a lucky few make a living wage, while the majority languish in slums and shanty towns (Lappé et al. 1998).

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, research shows the potential that could be achieved by redistribution of land. 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 (Rosset 1999). 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 (Altieri, Rosset, and Thrupp 1998).

### A Clash of Models in the Rural World

Many of the world’s organizations of family farmers, peasants, the landless, rural workers, indigenous people, rural youth, and rural women have joined

together in global alliance, La Via Campesina. According to La Via Campesina, we are facing a historic clash between two models of economic, social, and cultural development for the rural world. The dominant model and its negative impacts have been described above, and La Via Campesina counterposes an alternative paradigm called *food sovereignty*. Food sovereignty starts with the concept of economic and social human rights, which include the right to food (La Via Campesina 2002). But it goes further, arguing, as does the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food Jean Ziegler, that there is a corollary right to land, and, even, the “right to produce” for rural peoples (Ziegler 2002, 2004).

Proponents of food sovereignty argue that feeding a nation’s people is an issue of national security—of sovereignty, if you will. If the population of a country must depend for their next meal on the vagaries of the global economy, on the goodwill of a superpower not to use food as a weapon, on the unpredictability and high cost of long-distance shipping, then that country is not secure, neither in the sense of national security nor in the sense of food security. Food sovereignty thus goes beyond the concept of food security, which has been stripped of real meaning (Rosset 2003).

Food security means that every child, woman, and man must have the certainty of having enough to eat each day; but the concept says nothing about where that food comes from or how it is produced. Thus Washington is able to argue that importing cheap food from the United States is a better way for poor countries to achieve food security than producing it themselves. But massive imports of cheap, subsidized food undercut local farmers, driving them off their land. These people then swell the ranks of the hungry, and their food security is placed in the hands of the cash economy, just as they migrate to urban slums where they cannot find living-wage jobs. To achieve genuine food security, people in rural areas must have access to productive land and receive prices for their crops that allow them to make a decent living (Rosset 2003).

Real food security also means that access to land and productive resources is not enough. The current emphasis in trade negotiations on market access for exports, to the detriment of protection of domestic markets for domestic producers, is a critical problem. According to La Via Campesina (2002), “food sovereignty gives priority of market access to local producers. Liberalized agricultural trade, which gives access to markets on the basis of market power and low, often subsidized, prices, denies local producers access to their own markets,” and thus violates the right to produce, while undercutting local and regional economic development. One way to promote local economic development in rural areas is to create local circuits of production and con-

TABLE 16.1. Dominant model versus food sovereignty model

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Dominant model</i>	<i>Food sovereignty</i>
Trade	Free trade in everything	Food and agriculture exempt from trade agreements
Production priority	Agro-exports	Food for local markets
Crop prices	“What the market dictates” (i.e., leave intact the mechanisms that enforce low prices)	Fair prices that cover costs of production and allow farmers and farm workers a life with dignity
Market access	Access to foreign markets	Access to local markets; an end to the displacement of farmers from their own markets by agribusiness
Subsidies	While prohibited in the Third World, many subsidies are allowed in the United States and Europe but are paid only to the largest farmers	Subsidies that do not damage other countries via dumping are OK (i.e., grant subsidies only to family farmers, for direct marketing, price/income support, soil conservation, conversion to sustainable farming, research, etc.).
Food	Chiefly a commodity; in practice, this means processed, contaminated, food that is full of fat, sugar, high fructose corn syrup, and toxic residues	A human right; specifically, should be healthy, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and locally produced
Being able to produce	An option for the economically efficient	A right of rural peoples
Hunger	Due to low productivity	Problem of access and distribution due to poverty and inequality
Food security	Achieved by importing food from where it is cheapest	Greatest when food production is in the hands of the hungry or when produced locally

Control over productive resources (land, water, forests)	Privatized	Local, community controlled
Access to land	Via the market	Via genuine agrarian reform
Seeds	Patentable commodity	Common heritage of humanity, held in trust by rural communities and cultures; “no patents on life”
Rural credit and investment	From private banks and corporations	From the public sector, designed to support family agriculture
Dumping	Not an issue	Must be prohibited
Monopoly	Not an issue	The root of most problems
Overproduction	No such thing, by definition	Drives prices down and farmers into poverty; we need supply-management policies in the United States and the European Union
Farming technology	Industrial, monocultural, chemical-intensive; uses GMOs	Agroecological, sustainable farming methods, no GMOs
Farmers	Anachronism; the inefficient will disappear	Guardians of culture and crop germplasm; stewards of productive resources; repositories of knowledge; internal market and building block of broad-based, inclusive economic development
Urban consumers	Workers to be paid as little as possible	Need living wages and healthful, locally produced, affordable food
Genetically modified organisms (GMOs)	The wave of the future	Bad for health and the environment; an unnecessary technology, should be prohibited
Another world (alternatives)	Not possible/not of interest	Possible and amply demonstrated

sumption, where family farmers sell their produce in local towns and villages and buy other necessities from artisans and merchants in those towns. As we saw in chapter 15 (Heredia et al.), the presence of agrarian reform settlements boosts local economies in Brazil, despite the fact that the country lacks a “real” agrarian reform policy.

In this way money circulates several times in the local economy, generating town employment and enabling farmers to make a living. If, instead, all that farmers produce is exported to faraway countries that pay international market (i.e., low) prices, and all that they buy is also imported, all profits from the system are extracted from the local economy and can only contribute to economic development in remote locations like Wall Street. Food sovereignty places the emphasis on local markets and local economies as the *sine qua non* of fighting hunger and poverty (Rosset 2003).

Only by changing development tracks from the export-led, free trade-based, industrial agriculture model of large farms/land concentration/displacement of peoples can we stop the downward spiral of poverty, low wages, rural-urban migration, and environmental degradation. Redistributive land reform and a reversal of dominant trade policy hold the promise of change toward a smaller farm, family-based or cooperative model, with the potential to feed the poor, lead to broad-based economic development, and conserve biodiversity and productive resources (Rosset 1999, 2001b).

This brings us back to the argument of La Via Campesina, that we are facing a clash of models for the rural world, a clash of economic development models. The contrast between the dominant model, based on agro-exports, neoliberal economic policies, and free trade versus the food sovereignty model, could not be more stark (see table 16.1). On virtually every issue related to food, agriculture, and rural life, the positions are contrary. Where one model sees family farmers as a quaint but inefficient anachronism that should disappear with development (unless some farmers stay on as Disneyland-like attractions for bucolic rural tourism), the other sees them as the basis of local economies, as the internal market that enabled today’s industrial economic powerhouses like the United States, Japan, China, and South Korea to get off the ground in times past (Rosset 1999; Lappé, Collins, and Rosset 1998).

As for hunger, one model sees boosting exports from the giant plantations of the wealthy as the way to generate the foreign exchange needed to import cheap food for the hungry, while the other sees the conversion of farmland that once belonged to family farmers, peasants, and indigenous peoples to export cropping, as precisely the driving force behind the growth of hunger and

immiseration in rural areas. Finally, while the dominant model is based on chemical-intensive, large-scale monoculture, with genetically modified crops (GMOs), the food sovereignty model sees these industrial farming practices as eventually destroying the land for future generations, and it counterposes a mixture of traditional knowledge and sustainable, agroecologically based farming practices (Rosset 2003). Overall, this is why the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) of Brazil, a La Via Campesina member, says that "the enemy is the model," and the goal of the struggle is "mudança do modelo," or a transition of models. They argue that while agrarian reform is a critical piece in this transition, it is not enough. To be successful, agrarian reform must be embedded with a larger policy emphasis on food sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>

## Ongoing Agrarian Reforms

### *The Official Reforms*

The World Bank is taking the lead in promoting, and, in some cases, financing, comprehensive reforms of land tenure, including titling, cadastres and land registries, land-market facilitation, market-assisted or negotiated redistributive reforms, and credit, technical assistance, and marketing support (Rosset 2004; Deininger and Binswanger 2001; Deininger 2001; Bond 2000; figure 1 in the introduction to part II of this volume). Here the Bank has followed the lead of its own development economists, who have found that severe inequality in land tenure retards economic growth, poverty alleviation, and efforts to use soils sustainably (Deininger and Binswanger 2001). In this policy environment, other institutions, including governments, aid agencies, and other development banks are following the lead of the World Bank and aggressively implementing some, or in some cases, all of these reforms (de Janvry et al. 2001; Burns et al. 1996).

While one might applaud the fact that it is no longer taboo to propose land reform as a key element in sustainable development (de Janvry et al. 2001), we have seen in this volume how far short they fall. Land titling programs can lead to new land loss (Thailand) and conflicts (Mexico); their cost makes their potential scope woefully inadequate when compared to the magnitude of landlessness (Brazil and Colombia), while so-called beneficiaries are strapped with heavy debts for expensive land of dubious quality (Brazil). Furthermore, they tend to depoliticize the problem of landlessness, which by its nature can be addressed only by structural changes of a kind that fall squarely in the sphere of politics, rather than that of the market (Rosset 2002b, 2004, chapter 9).

Finally, these alleged reforms are carried out leaving the neoliberal policy environment, so inimical to family agriculture, and the “model,” intact. We can hope for little real change, then, from these efforts (Barracough 1999; Borras, chapter 5 in this volume).

### *State-Led Land Reforms*

“In every Latin American case where significant land redistribution benefiting the rural poor took place, the state played a decisive role,” wrote the late Solon Barracough (1999, 33). He also noted that, unfortunately, in every case where reform was denied or deformed, the state also played a critical role.

Only two contemporary governments, in Latin America or elsewhere, can truly be said to have a sincere commitment to genuine land reform, including a transition to models geared to making family-scale and cooperative agriculture more viable. These are Cuba and Venezuela, discussed in part III of this book.

While Cuba’s original revolutionary land reform took place in the 1960s, in chapter 12 we show how a second “reform within the reform” allowed Cuba to escape from a food crisis in the 1990s, in what might be the closest example to a true transition from an agro-export toward a more food sovereignty-like model of the kind called for by La Via Campesina. Figure 16.1 summarizes key elements that made such a transition possible. The sine qua non factors were, first of all, access to land by the rural majority, shown in the center of the schematic model. Cuba’s second land reform, to break up state farms into smaller, cooperative, and individual production units, was possible because the earlier expropriation of landlords had already taken place. Second, the de facto protection from dumping provided by the trade embargo, provided a positive condition (albeit for a very negative reason), in that higher prices paid to farmers provided the economic viability and incentives needed for agriculture itself to survive the crisis. The other key factors were state support for the transition (shifts in credit, research, extension, education, etc., to support the new model), a highly organized rural sector that made the rapid dissemination of change possible, and the existence of autoctonous, agroecological technology (from both accumulated peasant knowledge and from scientific institutions) to help break dependence on unavailable imported inputs.

The case of Venezuela is still very much up in the air. While the government of President Chavez has made clear its commitment to genuine agrarian reform, a number of factors—including the resistance of landlords and bureaucrats, the failure (so far) to address the dumping effects of massive food imports, and the relative lack of organization of the peasantry into an actor, or at least active subject, to push land reform—have so far conspired to keep progress uneven at best (chapter 13 in this volume).

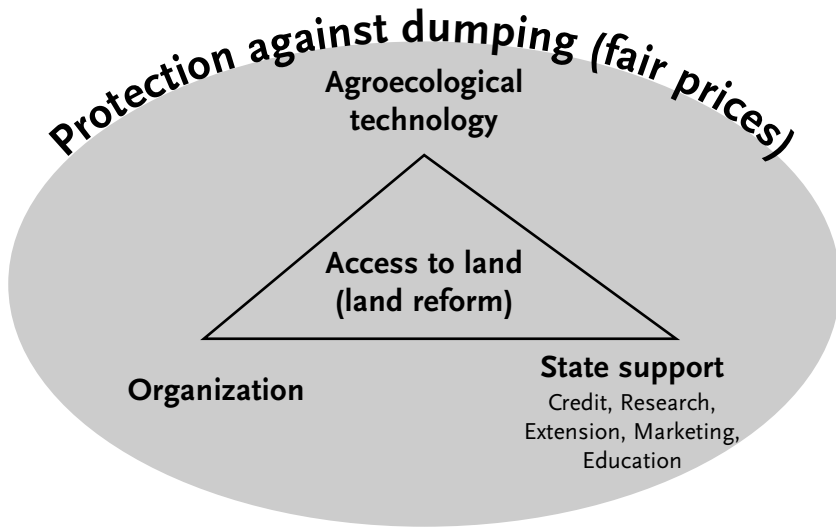


FIGURE 16.1. Keys to the Cuban transition toward a more food sovereignty-style model, during the 1990s

### *Land Reform from Below*

Barraclough also noted that, “in every case where significant land reforms occurred, protests and demands by organized peasant producers and rural workers made crucial contributions to bringing them about” (1999, 36). Today movements around the world are engaged in a wave of land occupations that are putting the pressure on governments to respond. The mid to late 1980s and 1990s saw the appearance, and, in some cases, the coming of age, of a new generation of well-organized movements of landless peasants and rural workers. While the landless have always engaged in takeovers, or recuperations, of idle lands, there has been a qualitative change in the organization and political savvy of contemporary groups. Landless movements are bringing land reform to national and international policy debates—even as they seize, occupy, and plant idle lands—often at tremendous cost of life or liberty. These movements are growing rapidly around the world, from Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua to South Africa, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Thailand, India, and countless other countries. Indeed, across most of the Third World, we are seeing the emergence of a new source of hope and dynamism, from these largely nonviolent poor people’s movements that sidestep government inaction and take matters firmly into their own hands (Rosset 2001b).

As we saw in part III of this volume, Brazil and the very successful Landless Workers' Movement (MST) are a case in point. While large landowners in Brazil on the average leave more than half of their land idle, twenty-five million peasants struggle to survive in temporary agricultural jobs. Founded in 1985, the MST organizes landless workers to occupy idle lands, using the "social function of land" clause in the Brazilian constitution to legalize their claims, though they must defend themselves against the hired guards of the landowners and government security forces. Today more than 300,000 families—which means more than 1 million people—have won title to over 8 million hectares of land through MST-led actions, a veritable reform from below (Langevin and Rosset 1997; Mançano Fernandes 2001; Wolford 2001; Wright and Wolford 2003).

### The Case for Redistributive Land Reform

The redistribution of land can fulfill a number of functions in more sustainable development (Barraclough 1999; Ziegler 2002; Boyce, Rosset, and Stanton 2005). Dozens of land reform programs were carried out after World War 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 (Lappé et al. 1998; Sobhan 1993, chapter 5).

When a significant proportion of quality land was really distributed to a majority of the rural poor, with trade, macroeconomic, and sectoral policies favorable to successful family farming in place; and when 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 (Sobhan 1993). The economic successes of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, and Cuba resulted from such reforms (Sachs 1987; Ziegler 2002). In contrast, when alleged reforms gave only poor-quality land to poor families and failed to support them with favorable policies, credits, prices, and access to markets, or failed to alter the rural power structures that work against the poor, land reform failed to affect broad-based changes (Sobhan 1993; Lappé et al., 1998; Thiesenhusen 1995; Barraclough 1999).

The more successful reforms triggered relatively broad-based economic development. By including the poor in economic development, these reforms built domestic markets to support national economic activity (Sachs 1987). The often-tragic outcome of failed reforms was to condemn the beneficiaries to marginalization from national economic life, 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 (Sobhan 1993; Thiesenhusen 1995).

Today we have a new opportunity to learn the lessons of past reforms and apply them to the practical goals of development. Land reform is no longer a taboo subject in the discourse on development, thanks in part to the 1996 World Food Summit, and to the somewhat unfortunate initiatives of the World Bank. We are witnessing a worldwide upsurge in people taking matters into their own hands via land occupations, both spontaneous and organized, on both a small and large scale. From the land crisis in Zimbabwe (Moyo and Yeros 2005), to the massive land takeovers in Chiapas in the wake of the Zapatista rebellion (Rosset 1995), to the MST in Brazil (Langevin and Rosset 1999; Wolford 2001), “land reform from below” is increasingly a reality even as policy makers dither. These grassroots movements, together with a wide array of civil society organizations, are increasingly challenging national governments and World Bank land reform policies, and putting forth alternatives.

Here we look at the important roles redistributive land reform can play in the move toward food sovereignty and more sustainable development.

### *Land Reform and Poverty*

History shows that the redistribution of land to landless and land-poor rural families can be a very effective way to improve rural welfare (Ziegler 2002). Sobhan (1993) examined the outcome of virtually every land reform program carried out in the Third World since World War II. He is careful to distinguish between what he calls “radical” redistribution (called “genuine land reform” by Lappé et al. 1998), and “nonegalitarian” reforms (or “fake land reform” in the terminology of Lappé et al.). When quality land was actually distributed to the poor, and the power of the rural oligarchy broken, real, measurable poverty reduction and improvement in human welfare has invariably been the result. In contrast, countries with reforms that gave only poor-quality land to beneficiaries, and/or failed to alter the rural power structures that work against the poor, have failed to make a major dent in rural poverty (Sobhan 1993; Lappé et al. 1998).

While Sobhan looked at national-level statistics to derive his conclusions, Besley and Burgess (2002) recently looked at the history of land reform in sixteen individual Indian states from 1958 to 1992. While these were by and large not radical reforms in Sobhan’s sense, many did abolish tenancy and reduce the importance of intermediaries. The authors found a strong relationship

between the degree of land reform and the reduction of poverty. Chapter 15 in this volume shows that settlers in land reform settlements in Brazil earn more than they did before and than still-landless families; they eat better, they have greater purchasing power, they have greater access to educational opportunities, and they are more likely to be able to unite their families in one place (rather than lose family members to migration). In fact, land reform holds promise as a means to stem the rural-urban migration that is causing Third World cities to grow beyond the capacity of urban economies to provide enough jobs. Even in Zimbabwe, where earlier land reforms were ended prematurely, the evidence shows that beneficiaries are quite substantially better off than others (Deininger et al. 2000).

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 farmland, through agrarian reform. Land reform beneficiaries in Brazil have an annual income equivalent to 3.7 times the minimum wage, 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 (Stédile 1998). This provides a powerful argument that land reform, for the creation of 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.

Sobhan (1993) argues that only land reform holds the potential to address chronic underemployment in most Third World countries. Because small farms use more labor—and often less capital—to farm a given unit of area, a small-farm model can absorb far more people into gainful activity and reverse the stream of out-migration from rural areas.

### *Land Reform and Productivity*

In the past there was a longstanding debate concerning the likely impacts of the redistribution of farm land to the poor, which almost inevitably leads, on the average, to smaller production units. One concern was that, when freed from exploitative sharecropping, rental, or labor relationships, the poor would retain a greater proportion of their own production for their own consumption (not necessarily a bad thing), thus leading to a net decrease in food availability for other consumers. However, this argument has been put to rest by the

evidence (Sobhan 1993), and by the productivity gains that can be achieved by shifting to smaller-scale, more intensive styles of production.

In Brazil, family farm agriculture produces 24 percent of the total national value of production of beef, 24 percent of milk, 58 percent of pork, and 40 percent of poultry and eggs. It also generates 33 percent of cotton, 31 percent of rice, 72 percent of onions, 67 percent of green beans, 97 percent of tobacco, 84 percent of cassava, 49 percent of maize, 32 percent of soya, 46 percent of wheat, 58 percent of bananas, 27 percent of oranges, 47 percent of grapes, 25 percent of coffee, and 10 percent of sugar. In total, family farm agriculture accounts for 40 percent of the total national value of production, while occupying just 30.5 percent of the cultivated land area. It generates fully 76.9 percent of the national employment in agriculture, all while receiving only 25.3 percent of farm credit (Pengue 2005).

In fact, data show that small farms almost always produce far more agricultural output per unit area than larger farms, and do so more efficiently (Rosset 1999). This holds true whether we are talking about industrial countries or any country in the Third World. This is widely recognized by agricultural economists as the “inverse relationship between farm size and output” (Tomich, Kirby, and Johnston 1995; Rosset 1999). A recent report (Rosset 1999) examined the relationship between farm size and total output for fifteen countries in the Third World. In all cases, relatively smaller farm sizes were much more productive per unit area—two to ten times more productive—than larger ones. Thus redistributive land reform is not likely to run at cross-purposes with productivity issues.

### *Land Reform and Economic Development*

Agrarian reform that is truly transformative and redistributive has proved to be fundamental in reducing poverty and hunger in many countries, and can be a key to generating economic growth that benefits the poorest.

—Jean Ziegler, *Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the Right to Food*, 2002

Surely more tons of grain is not the only goal of farm production; farm resources must also generate wealth for the overall improvement of rural life—including better housing, education, health services, transportation, local economic diversification, and more recreational and cultural opportunities.

In the United States, the question was asked more than a half-century

ago: what does the growth of large-scale industrial agriculture mean for rural towns and communities? Walter Goldschmidt's classic 1940's study of California's San Joaquin Valley compared areas dominated by large corporate farms with those still characterized by smaller, family farms (see Goldschmidt 1978; Lappé, Collins, and Rosset 1999).

In farming communities dominated by large corporate farms, nearby towns died off. Mechanization meant that fewer local people were employed, and absentee ownership meant that farm families themselves were no longer to be found. In these corporate-farm towns, the income earned in agriculture was drained off into larger cities to support distant enterprises, while in towns surrounded by family farms, the income circulated among local business establishments, generating jobs and community prosperity. Where family farms predominated, there were more local businesses, paved streets and sidewalks, schools, parks, churches, clubs, newspapers, better services, higher employment, and more civic participation. Studies conducted since Goldschmidt's original work confirm that his findings remain true today (see Fujimoto 1977; MacCannell 1988; Durrenberger and Thu 1996).

The Amish and Mennonite farm communities, found in the eastern United States, provide a strong contrast to the virtual devastation described by Goldschmidt in corporate-farm communities. Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, which is dominated by these small farmers, who eschew much modern technology and, often, bank credit as well, is the most productive farm county east of the Mississippi River. It has annual gross sales of agricultural products of US\$700 million, and receives an additional US\$250 million from tourists who appreciate the beauty of traditional small-farm landscapes (D'Souza and Ikerd, 1996).

If we turn toward the Third World we find a similar situation. On the one hand there is the devastation caused by land concentration and the industrialization of agriculture, while on the other we find local benefits to be derived from a small farm economy—in one case, created by land reform from below.

Chapter 15 in this volume describes how local towns benefit from the commerce that is generated when estates belonging to absentee landlords are turned into productive family and cooperative farming enterprises through land reform driven from below. A study of one such municipality, Julho de Castilhos, found that while the MST settlement possessed only 0.7 percent of the land, its members paid 5 percent of the taxes, making the settlement into

the municipality's second largest rural tax payer (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra 2001a, 2001b).

It is clear that local and regional economic development can benefit from a small-farm economy, as can the life and prosperity of rural towns. But what of national economic development?

History has shown us that a relatively equitable, small farmer-based rural economy provides the basis for strong national economic development. This "farmer road to development" is part of the reason, for example, the United States, early on in its history, developed more rapidly and evenly than did Latin America with its inequitable land distribution characterized by huge haciendas and plantations interspersed with poverty-stricken subsistence farmers (de Janvry 1981). In the early decades of the United States, independent "yeoman" farmers formed a vibrant domestic market for manufactured products from urban areas, including farm implements, clothing, and other necessities. This domestic demand fueled economic growth in the urban areas, and the combination gave rise to broad-based growth (Sachs 1987).

The post-war experiences of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, in the capitalist world, and China, Cuba, and, more recently, Vietnam, in the socialist world, also demonstrate how equitable land distribution fuels economic development. At the end of the Second World War, circumstances, including devastation and foreign occupation, conspired to create the conditions for radical land reforms in the former countries—while revolutions did the same in the latter—breaking the economic stranglehold of the landholding class over rural economic life. Combined with trade protection to keep farm prices high, and targeted investment in rural areas, farm families rapidly achieved a high level of purchasing power, which guaranteed domestic markets for fledging industries (Rosset 1999; Lappé et al. 1998; Sachs 1987; International Fund for Agricultural Development 2001).

The post-war economic miracles of the three capitalist countries were each fueled at the start by internal markets centered in rural areas, long before the advent of the much-heralded export-orientation policies, which much later on pushed those industries to compete in the global economy. This was a real triumph for "bubble-up" economics, in which redistribution of productive assets to the poorest strata of society created the economic basis for rapid, relatively inclusive development. While this analysis in no way is meant to suggest that all policies pursued by these countries were positive, or should be blindly replicated, their experience does stand in stark contrast to the failure of trickle-

down economics to achieve much of anything in the same time period in areas of US dominance, such as much of Latin America (Sachs 1987). More generally, there is now a growing consensus among mainstream development economists, long called for by many in civil society, that inequality in asset distribution impedes economic growth (Solimano 2000).

A key distinction that Sobhan (1993) makes is between transformative agrarian reforms and other types. In most redistributive reforms those who actually receive land are at least nominally better off than those who remain landless (unless and until policies inimical to small-farm agriculture lead them to lose their land once again). However, certain agrarian reforms have been the key step in allowing entire nations to change development tracks. In these cases countries have “jumped” from the alienating, downward spiral into poverty and environmental degradation, to the upward spiral of broad-based improvements in living standards, producing strong internal markets, which in turn lead to more dynamic and inclusive economic development—the Japans, South Koreas, Chinas, Taiwans, and others. Sobhan shows by comparative analysis what the transformative reforms, those that led to real social transitions, have had in common. In brief, the majority of the landless and land poor benefited; the majority of the arable land was affected; the stranglehold of entrenched power structures over rural life and economy was broken; and favorable, enabling economic policies were put in place. A key feature of the more successful reforms is that farm families were seen as key actors to be mobilized in national economic development—whereas in failed reforms they have typically been seen as indigents in need of charitable assistance.

### *Land Reform and the Environment*

The benefits of small-farm economies extend beyond the merely economic sphere. Whereas large, industrial-style farms impose a scorched-earth mentality on resource management—no trees, no wildlife, endless monocultures—small farmers can be very effective stewards of natural resources and the soil. To begin with, small farmers use a broad array of resources and have a vested interest in their sustainability. At the same time, their farming systems are diverse, incorporating and preserving significant functional biodiversity within the farm. By preserving biodiversity, open space, and trees, and by reducing land degradation, small farms provide valuable ecosystem services to the larger society (Rossett 1999).

In the United States, small farmers devote 17 percent of their area to woodlands, compared to only 5 percent on large farms. Small farms maintain nearly

twice as much of their land in “soil-improving uses,” including cover crops and green manures (D’Souza and Ikerd 1996). In the Third World, peasant farmers show a tremendous ability to prevent and even reverse land degradation, including soil erosion (Templeton and Scherr, 1999). They can and/or do provide important services to society at large, including sustainable management of critical watersheds, thus preserving hydrological resources and the in situ conservation and dynamic development and management of the basic crop and livestock genetic resources on the which the future food security of humanity depends.

Compared with the ecological wasteland of a modern export plantation, the small-farm landscape contains a myriad of biodiversity. The forested areas from which wild foods and leaf litter are extracted; the wood lot; the farm itself with intercropping, agroforestry, and large and small livestock; the fish pond; the backyard garden—all these allow for the preservation of hundreds if not thousands of wild and cultivated species. Simultaneously, the commitment of family members to maintaining soil fertility on the family farm means an active interest in long-term sustainability not found on large farms owned by absentee investors. If we are truly concerned about rural ecosystems, the preservation and promotion of small, family farm agriculture is a crucial step we must take (Rossett 1999).

### Moving Forward: Guidelines for the Future

Rather than following the World Bank’s market-based approach, policy makers and social movements should learn from the successes and failures of the post–World War II period and from ongoing reforms. A set of useful guidelines should include the following:

- Severe inequality in landholdings—such as the *latifundia/minifundia* pattern in many parts of Latin America—is inefficient, environmentally and socially destructive, immoral, and impedes broad-based development. A range of perspectives and concerns—from economic and social human rights to economic growth—all lead to the conclusion that we must once and for all eliminate the *latifundia* (Rosset 2001b; Repartir a Terra 2001; Ziegler 2002).
- 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 to former owners (Sobhan 1993; Borras, chapter 5 in this volume).

- Secure tenure and/or access rights are critical to ensuring long-term food security for families and communities. Without such security and/or rights it is also difficult for families and communities to invest in land improvement, means of production, and/or conservation measures (Lastarria-Cornhiel and Melmed-Sanjak 1998).
- Women must have the right to hold title to land or participate as equals in communal ownership. When titles are vested exclusively in male heads of household, the departure or premature death of a male spouse often leads to the destitution of women and children (Deere and León 2001a, b; Monsalve Suárez, chapter 10 in this volume).
- The land distributed must be of good quality, rather than ecologically fragile soils that should never be farmed, and it must be free of disputed claims by other poor people (Rosset 2001b).
- The rights of indigenous and other peoples to land, forests, water, and other common property resources must be guaranteed and protected, as must be their right to manage them using customary law and tradition. Provision must be made for individual and/or collective rights, depending on each socio-cultural situation. No one recipe can be applied everywhere (Hall 1998; Stavenhagen, chapter 11 in this volume).
- People need more than land if they are to be successful. There must also be a supportive policy environment and essential services such as credit on reasonable terms, infrastructure, support for ecologically sound technologies, and access to markets and fair prices (Sobhan 1993; Sachs 1987; Adams 2000; IFAD 2001). Perhaps most critical is to step back from damaging free-trade policies and dumping—which drive down farm prices and undercut the economic viability of farming—and apply a food sovereignty perspective that places the highest priority on national production for national markets (World Forum on Food Sovereignty 2001; Rosset 2003).
- Truly transformative reforms will also require investment in rural areas to ensure basic services such as schools, health clinics, potable water, and basic infrastructure (Sobhan 1993, chapter 15).
- The power of rural elites to distort and capture policies, subsidies, and windfall profits in their favor must be effectively broken by the reforms (Sobhan 1993).

- The vast majority of the rural poor must be actual, not token, beneficiaries of the reform process (Sobhan 1993).
- Successful reforms are distinguished from failed ones by a motivation and perception that the new small family farms that are created will 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 (Sobhan 1993; Sachs 1987; Rosset 2001b).
- In today's conservative, neoliberal political environment, strong grassroots poor people's movements are critical to pushing the reform process, stopping government foot-dragging and, when necessary, taking matters into their own hands. Land occupations are one of the most effective, proven methods of pressuring governments to act (Wolford 2001; Langevin and Rosset 1997; Barraclough 1999; Wright and Wolford 2003).

