

INTRODUCTION

Critical Themes in Agrarian Reform

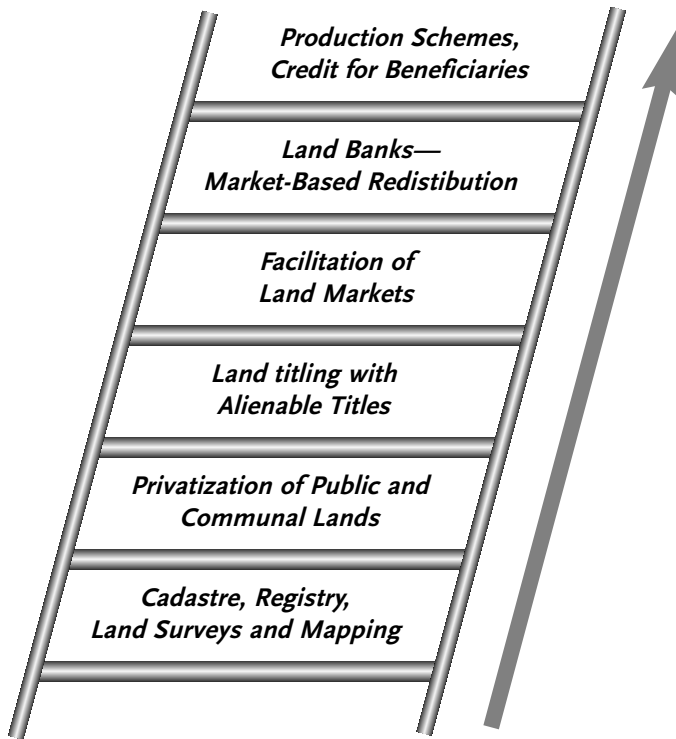
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The end of the Cold War was accompanied, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, by “the end of history.” This is more accurate than Fukuyama knows. It turns out that “the end of history” describes not the era of the Washington Consensus but its goal: the erasure of history through the market. In this section we look at how post–Cold War land policy, authored by the World Bank and tweaked by local and international consultants to suit local conditions, has worked out in a range of countries. The countries chosen for examination here are those most often cited as examples of World Bank–led success (Deininger 2001; Deininger and Binswanger 2001). Under closer scrutiny by scholars and activists familiar with both the history of reform and the history of alternatives, the veneer of success is rather quickly peeled away.

This section opens with Saturnino Borrás’s overview of market-led agrarian reform. Borrás outlines the promarket critique of Cold War land policies, detailing its catalog of errors and omissions, with evidence from the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa—countries in which the World Bank has most vigorously piloted its market-based land policies. Borrás argues that the Bank’s policies have failed in their own terms and that the state-led agrarian reforms to which they are supposedly superior have, in fact, been much better than market-led policies in creating the conditions for just and sustainable rural economies and societies.

Subsequent chapters then consider the effects of the World Bank’s land policies in different contexts. Market-led agrarian reform is a single, homogeneous series of policies that form a sequence (as shown schematically in figure 1). The policies begin with mapping and surveying the land and then move to

FIGURE 1. Sequence of typical World Bank reforms



Source: After Rosset 2002, 2004

create private property rights for the land: privatizing communal and public lands where possible and creating land titling regimes, markets to facilitate the transfer of these titles, and credit facilities to fund these transfers; and, finally, providing production schemes to fund the productive activities of beneficiaries of these land transfers. The countries affected are at different points on this policy ladder—some, such as India, already have achieved full land titling, while others, such as Thailand, are still in the process of creating a titling regime. The final goal of the process is, however, the same: complete private ownership of land, and “functioning land markets” in which land—that essential asset of rural life—is bought, sold, and rented like any other commodity.

In Thailand, Rebeca Leonard and Kingkorn Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya follow the twists and turns of the land titling program there. Thailand’s is one

of the first attempts to begin a system of titling, with its origins in the 1980s. The results have systematically benefited landlords, who have used the opportunity to engage in land speculation, retaining land that previously had been protected for community use. The titling regime has, however, been largely unsuited to the needs of the poorest members of the community, who have found their traditional homes titled away from underneath them. Even those not facing direct eviction have found themselves unable to afford the rising price of land. This theme is echoed in Ana De Ita's essay, in which she investigates the processes of land concentration in Mexico after the intervention of the neoliberal social policy called PROCEDE. De Ita's work serves as an important reminder that land policies do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a broader constellation of neoliberal policies that have invariably left the poor in a more precarious situation, forced, to all intents and purposes, into survival strategies that have the effect of disenfranchising them from the land.

In some cases, disenfranchisement from land occurs in a context of violence, and nowhere is this clearer than in Colombia. Héctor Mondragón details agrarian reform processes there, showing that while there has indeed been agrarian reform in Colombia, it has been somewhat schizophrenic. At one level, the process of land redistribution to the poor has been in decline, with fewer resources being devoted to it, and with a growing backlog of land redistribution cases that the government seems unwilling to address. Pilot projects with this kind of land reform have spawned their own failures, while being praised outside the country. Yet, as Mondragón points out, agrarian reform is more than just land reform—it involves a spectrum of trade, extension, and investment policies, all of which have been handed over to the private sector and which, as a consequence, have resulted in an agrarian reform process that impoverishes the majority at the same time as it reforms the macroeconomy, making land concentration and exploitation easier for those with access to substantial sums of capital. Thus, the crawling pace of reform for the majority coexists with a vigorous agrarian reform for the few.

Conscious of its failings in other programs but attributing those to “endogenous” institutional arrangements, the World Bank has invested in creating land reform programs from whole cloth. While Borrás touches on these, Sérgio Sauer analyzes the highly publicized *cédula da terra* program, the most controversial of all of the land projects backed by the Bank. The *cédula* program is a land bank in which “beneficiaries” receive loans to buy land on the market. It is fraught with problems, ranging from a profound lack of transparency to the precarious financial status of the indebted beneficiaries.

Perhaps the single unifying critique in all the country case studies is the stubborn refusal of market-led land reform policies to acknowledge the existence of differences in power between those who control land and those who do not. Markets compound and consolidate these power relations. The epitome of these differences in power is that between the sexes. In her paper, Sofía Monsalve Suárez describes the processes through which gender inequities have been addressed not by the market but despite it, through social movement struggles and engagement. She outlines the processes through which specific social organizations are engaged in the on-the-ground creation and development of both “a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution,” at the heart of which is a transformative project on gender.

Another important component of these differences in power stems from colonial history. Colonialism has been successful in exterminating or effectively disabling indigenous populations in large parts of the world, and that process continues under neoliberalism. This contemporary colonial project has, like its predecessors, encountered staunch resistance. Rodolfo Stavenhagen offers a compact overview of the modes of these struggles, focusing on institutional forms. Just as a gendered critique forces us to reconsider relations of power when thinking about what constitutes “work” on the land, indigenous land claims force us to reconsider the basic category of “land” when looking at modern agrarian struggles. This, in turn, should prompt us to rethink what a just and socially equitable agrarian policy might look like if we abandon that category in favor of more historically and socially bound ideas of “territory.”

Together, these chapters deconstruct and build a contemporary terrain of struggle for agrarian policy and, ultimately, for food sovereignty, for peoples’ right to choose their own food politics through democratic processes of contention and intervention.