

## **Promised Land Foreword**

Two decades ago, land redistribution appeared to be dead, along with the state-led model of industrialization that had motivated most agrarian reform efforts. The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s once again focused attention on external markets. In this context, land redistribution lost its primary economic rationale since enhancing rural incomes to support an expanding internal market for the industrialization effort was no longer a priority.

The issue of the pressing need for land redistribution was resurrected in the 1990s by two contending forces: the rural social movements contesting their exclusion under neoliberalism, and the World Bank. Despite their differences, they share a recognition of the centrality of the land question for rural livelihoods.

The World Bank now associates the continued concentration of land in less-developed countries with intractable rural poverty and, in a departure from its previous analyses, also with the disappointingly low economic growth rates in many regions. The solution is to put land into the hands of those who can work it most productively, ostensibly small farmers. This should be done via the market, it contends, which can distribute land more efficiently than the state and with less conflict.

For the rural social movements that have joined together to form *Vía Campesina* (an international association of peasant, landless, indigenous, and women's organizations), the market, rather than being part of the solution, is part of the problem. Increased reliance on market forces in the context of neoliberal economic restructuring has led to the demise of peasant farming. Under these conditions, market-led land reform is destined to fail. Market-led land reform is also unjust, they argue, since it rewards those who in the past have usurped and concentrated land.

Most of the essays in this volume—whose scope includes Africa, Asia, and Latin America—demonstrate either the shortcomings of previous agrarian reform efforts or the limited nature of market-led land reform in those countries where it has been implemented. The authors, most of whom are researchers closely associated with the rural social movements, place power relations center-stage in their analyses. They show that the limited agrarian reform efforts of the past failed, not because of intrinsic problems of peasant agriculture but because of the lack of political will among elites in the face of entrenched resistance from the landlord class. Similarly, decentralizing land distribution efforts to the local level, including the sale and purchase of land, exacerbates the power differences between those who control land and those who do not in favor of the former.

Several factors favor redistributionary agrarian reform in the current period. Somewhat ironically, among them is hyper-urbanization. The lack of correspondence between urbanization and industrialization has meant that in a number of the countries discussed in this volume, the majority

of the poor now reside in urban areas. High rates of urban under- and unemployment, and the attendant crime and squalor, have made the cities increasingly unlivable. In this context, a rural solution to urban problems has gained support among social movements and some sectors of the urban middle class and the elite, particularly in contexts where it is cheaper to redistribute land than to create urban jobs.

Another factor favoring redistributionary agrarian reform in the current period is the pressing need for sustainable agricultural systems. The industrial model of agriculture, based on the intense use of natural resources (particularly water and hydrocarbons), while successful in the short run to generate export revenues, is simply not sustainable on a global scale.

The most important factor, however, in placing redistributionary agrarian reform back on the agenda has been the agency of peasants, rural workers, and their organizations. The 1990s brought a resurgence of rural organizing, particularly among sectors that had not been previously organized, such as rural women, indigenous groups, and the landless. Moreover, these national organizations are increasingly linked at the regional and global levels. *Vía Campesina* has taken a leading role in the World Social Forums, which have been held annually since 2001, and in the case of Latin America, the hemispheric-level Social Summits and anti-FTAA meetings.

The essays in this volume argue that redistributionary agrarian reform could be the pillar of an alternative model of development to neoliberalism, one built on food sovereignty—favoring national agriculture over imports—and sustainable development—prioritizing small farmers over corporate agriculture. They outline the main elements required for successful agrarian reform efforts: they must be massive in scale, based on the intense mobilization and participation by the landless, and comprehensive, which requires a supportive state. As the rural social movements remind us, “Another World Is Possible!” This volume is an important contribution to defining this vision.

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