

Promised land

Preface: A History and Overview of the Land Research Action Network

This book comes at a key moment in the history of the age-old struggle for land. Agrarian reform is back at the center of the international debate over rural development, after a long hiatus during which it was virtually a forbidden topic. Fair and equitable access to land and other resources like water, forests, and biodiversity is perhaps the most fundamental 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. This book proposes a model of development that focuses on the redistribution of land through agrarian reform and through supportive policies for small farmers, an alternative paradigm, that has been called “food sovereignty” by La Via Campesina, the global alliance of peasant, family farm and landless peoples’ movements, and which is described on the final chapter of this volume.

In the immediate post–World War II period, there was a flurry of land reform efforts across the Third World, some successful and some relatively unsuccessful, for reasons addressed in this volume. Yet in the 1970s and 1980s, the topic of agrarian reform became taboo in official development circles—one would be labeled a communist or a dinosaur, stuck in the past, if one raised agrarian reform as a serious option. But recently, a combination of factors has put it squarely back at the center of the development debate.

The 1990s saw the coming of age of well-organized movements of landless peasants and rural workers in much of the Third World. While the landless have always engaged in sporadic invasions of property belonging to absentee landlords, there has been a qualitative change in the cohesion, organization, and political savvy demonstrated by contemporary groups—the undisputed leader of which is Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra [MST])—though very significant, organized land occupations have also taken place in recent years in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Paraguay, Zimbabwe, Honduras, Thailand, South Africa, and Nicaragua, among others.

These organizations press for access to land for their landless or land-poor members, and they increasingly speak with an international voice through La Via Campesina, which also sponsors the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform (GCAR). GCAR seeks to build cooperation among landless movements and to build support for them so they can bring effective pressure to bear on governments and in international forums.

Landless movements have put the struggle for land reform back on the agenda of national policy debates—often at tremendous cost in terms of arbitrary arrests and lives lost. At

the opposite end of the spectrum, economists at the World Bank have finally come to accept a key point that activists and social scientists alike have been making for decades: after examining their own data on countries around the world, World Bank economists have come to the conclusion that extremely inequitable access to productive resources, such as land, is a major obstacle to economic development and even to economic growth. The Bank itself has now placed its version of land reform at the center of the policy packages it pushes on Third World governments.

While what the Bank calls land reform—essentially privatization, the promotion of markets in land, and “market-led” mechanisms of access—is a far cry from what La Via Campesina and other grassroots movements call for, this change in Bank policy has had the salutary effect of making legitimate again the call for land reform and the struggle over its definition. In fact, as highlighted in this book, we are witnessing a period of intense struggle over the content of the “agrarian reform” that is back on the development agenda. There are at least four general visions that define the key positions in this debate. On the one hand, the Bank and other international agencies, as well as governments, favor a market-based approach born of neoliberal thinking, which is examined by the authors in part II of this volume; while grassroots movements and progressive governments lean toward redistributive models that involve expropriation, some of which are reviewed in part III. Other crucially important viewpoints are those of indigenous peoples’ organizations, which emphasize the importance of “territory” over “land,” as well as autonomy and self-determination; and a gender perspective that is highly critically of biases favoring men, both in current land tenure arrangements and in many agrarian reform programs, while women often lack titles or other guarantees of access to land. These perspectives are also examined in this volume.

This book represents the first harvest in the English language of the work of the Land Research Action Network (LRAN). LRAN is an international working group of researchers, analysts, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and representatives of social movements. LRAN’s aim is to provide research and analytical support to movements that are struggling for land, as part of the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform (GCAR). We offer this volume as an informational and analytical tool to those movements, and to those researchers, policy makers, activists, academics, analysts, students, and others who are interested to learn more about issues of agrarian reform in the early twenty-first century. In this book we begin with a historical perspective on agrarian reform and land issues, using case studies of representative countries. We then devote the bulk of the book to an examination of the different viewpoints in the struggle to define agrarian reform, and to an evaluation of the results to date of the policies and strategies that emerge from these contrasting perspectives.

Financial support for much of the research presented in the volume and for the publication of this book was provided by the Ford, C. S. Mott, and Pond Foundations; by the Kaplan Fund; the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED) of Germany and Food

First donors. We are grateful for their support. We express special thanks to the peasants and landless people of La Via Campesina and other social movements for the constant inspiration that they give us.

Shalmali Guttal,
Focus on the Global South, Thailand

Maria Luisa Mendonça,
Social Network for Justice and Human Rights (Rede Social), Brazil

Peter Rosset,
Center for the Study of Rural Change in Mexico (CECCAM), Mexico

Co-coordinators, Land Research Action Network (LRAN)
www.landaction.org

