



Press Statement

Dhaka, March 16, 2008

Land Reform ***From Failed Expectations to Renewed Opportunity***

With over 60% of the Bangladesh labour force being employed in agriculture, accounting for 35% of the national GDP, it is a tragic irony that hunger and poverty is highest among those who grow food.

In the past few days, Raja Devasish Roy, Special Assistant to the Chief Advisor and Rasheda K. Choudhury, Advisor to the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, have stated without qualification that agrarian reform is essential to human development and poverty reduction in Bangladesh. I have travelled with our partner organisation, the Association for Land Reform and Development, to Baliakandi where I have learned of the failure of expectations from over 100 landless people. Their demands surpass all measures of reasonable expectation – government should implement the existing land legislation. Their non-violent struggle for their rights stands in stark opposition to the many forms of exploitation that they have endured over years, years that have grown into decades.

Bangladesh has three pieces of legislation that all parties, the landless, the representatives of the Government and the Association for Land Reform and Development, consider favourable to the poor - to distribute khas land to the landless; to enforce the regulations on sharecropping; and, to ensure fair employment conditions and wages for agriculture workers. However pro-poor this legislation may be, as with other countries, the government of Bangladesh does not seem willing or able to live up to its own legislation. While this is easy to say, the global nature of the work of the International Land Coalition, makes it well aware that implementation means confronting the powerful interests that stand in the way. Politics is the art of making the necessary possible. In Bangladesh, this means making land reform possible, by standing up for the rights of the landless and near landless, instead of the "ill-gotten" privileges of the few.

When I walked beside the flourishing crops being grown by the landless on khas land, I asked myself if their crops will be expropriated by elites filing false land claims. I also thought about the potential of small holder farmers to raise national food supplies and reduce the rising food import bill of Bangladesh. International research and "on-the-ground experience" confirms that small holder agriculture can produce more food per unit of land than commercial agriculture and, in aggregate terms increase overall supplies and national food security.

As early as 1987, under its Land Reform Action Program, Bangladesh recognised the threat of land grabbing. As in other countries, the challenge that emerges is that the institutions that control land are in the hands of the powerful non-poor. A common question arises in all of the countries where the ILC is involved. Can these institutions that were created by political and land elites to serve their own interests, be reformed to meet the needs of the poor?

I have learned that the government repealed the Vested Property Act in 2001, but the lack of enforcement means that more than 5 million people remain the victims of the discrimination that the repeal of this law was intended to address. If enforced, the government can empower these 5 million people with their rights and the productive means to become food self-reliant and to generate improved family incomes. I have also been briefed on the Land Commission that was established in 1997 under the consensus between the Hills people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Government. I understand that the commission needs to be reconstituted to overcome its current ineffective and largely dysfunctional condition.

Politics is the art of making the necessary possible. Many studies by renowned Bangladeshi scholars and researchers confirm not only that land reform is essential to development, but that agrarian development can be a driving force in overcoming rural poverty and expanding the overall economy. Evidence from countries with a high reliance on agriculture is that where property rights are secure, investments in agriculture have, on average, a 2.7% multiplier effect in the national economy.

Bangladesh has taken a very important first step by putting enabling land legislation in place, legislation that compares favourably with today's call for pro-poor land governance. Nothing compares with the central nature of land, as the way for the caretaker government to show that it is committed to creating a new political future. By putting the current land legislation into action, the country will receive the signal that change is coming. It will send the signal that a pro-poor government is needed to lead the country into the future. It will make it clear that land grabbing, a primary form of corruption, will no longer be tolerated and that former abuses will be addressed. And, it will put the continued implementation of land reform on the national agenda, regardless of which political party leads the next government.

By taking immediate steps toward enforcing the current laws, regulations and policies, the government will make a very positive contribution toward the reduction of poverty and liberate the landless and small holders to not only improve their own well-being, but to contribute to overall agriculture production and the national economy.

For the International Land Coalition, landlessness is a proxy for poverty. Landlessness can be used to measure the performance of governments in implementing poverty reduction strategies and in meeting government commitments to the Millennium Development Goals.

The ILC stands ready to support the steps that can turn today's false expectations among the landless of Bangladesh into a renewed opportunity to reduce poverty and realise the implementation of the land reform dreams that are held by many millions of poor people throughout the country.

The International Land Coalition is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organisations, including the United Nations (IFAD, WFP, FAO, UNEP), IFPRI, the World Bank, the European Commission.

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