

## **“Povertology” and Agrarian Reform**

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1. The failure of several third world Agrarian Reforms and the reactions that this has sparked provides us with an opportunity to add to the debate with a few points of reflection. Within the framework of the International Land Coalition (ILC), a global network of civil society and intergovernmental organizations, a number of nationally-based institutions are discussing the issue of rural poverty from another standpoint, one that is quite old and nearly forgotten: poverty reduction strategies cannot be considered as such if they do not change the realities that produce rural poverty. The current situation is even more serious and contradictory given the fact that never before in history has the world produced such colossal wealth in the northern countries; this globalisation of wealth in the first world is also only possible thanks to an equally colossal generation of poor populations and generalised rural poverty. The globalisation of poverty and inequities in the southern countries has become the main constraint to rural development.
2. The MDG could not be reached because the basic premise of this viewpoint is that reducing poverty must not affect the rich and the land lord; unfortunately, history's dogged ways show us that this is not possible. Within the context of a uni-polar world, a new methodological and conceptual focus has been imposed over the last decade. This has led to the belief that thinking about the poor and establishing pro-poor policies could provide the key to understanding and explaining the causes of poverty, as well as providing us with the means to deal with it. There has also been the generalised belief that thinking only about the poor and working only with them would eliminate their poverty. Adopting this focus mean abandoning the analysis of why and how modern society – imposed by globalisation – generates so many poor and does so more and more every day.
3. What seems absurd nowadays is that so much thought is given to the poor, yet none is given to society. The ‘question of poverty’ has left out and dissolved the ‘question of society’. The result of this ideological trap is ‘the fight against poverty’, a formidable slogan that seeks to replace social and national struggles. “Povertology” is thus nothing more than a perverse point of view that presupposes that social and national struggles are no longer alive and kicking. It also takes as given that the causes of poverty lay within the poor themselves, and that poverty is an external phenomenon - or one that has nothing to do with the society that produces it. It assumes that poverty can be combated without affecting society and international relations. And so Latin America – its co-operation agencies, governments, political systems and several non-governmental organisations – has rooted itself in the conviction that poverty and its exponential growth are due to a lack of social policies, conveniently forgetting the sole principal that has been the pillar of equality and equity in every social model throughout history: the distribution of wealth or products of society.
4. The most dramatic paradox of this analysis is that the concentration of wealth in our countries is continuing to take place within our democratic institutions, which – with rare exceptions – instead of upholding that democratic action, merely serve to legitimate antidemocratic powers, procedures, forms, functions, processes and relationships. The

deformed democracy that some countries currently lives with, has not only made it possible for greater poverty and wider gaps between the landless and the landlord to flourish, but has even legitimised this situation. Our democracies are becoming void of content and are covering up the causes and consequences of the current crises in rural political participation and representation.

5. This context makes it clear that if new Agrarian Reform is to serve some purpose, it should be as a tool for the direct re-distribution of assets to the poorest, to the landless, as well as for the transferral of the requisite political and economical power to administer those resources. This must be within the framework of the Agrarian Reform, under the control of the local population and based on their own interests, given that being indigenous, a peasant and a woman increase the risk of being trapped in extreme poverty. While the late Agrarian Reform was a turning point in several countries history, it has been unable to overcome rural poverty. Nevertheless, living conditions in the countryside have improved in terms of access to education, health and housing. However, family income from agriculture is now less in both relative and absolute terms.
6. The political economy of land is an increasingly prevalent reference in land debates - a phrase used to emphasise the complexities of land issues. ILC may split this into politics and economics and cite on the political side that with landed elites and political elites being one and the same, if not closely allied, the issue is not politics but power. The elites have no political incentives to change until countervailing forces are supported, gain collective capacity, legitimised and take a rightful place in decision-making. This means the tenure context requires involving and strengthening the institutions of the poor so they gain influence. The land debate at country levels continues to be controlled by elites and international organisations talking to elites, especially intergovernmental organisations who work via governments. On the economic side, the follies of global trade and the repeat performance of the 1970's are again being shown that wealth does not trickle down and the transnationals extract and move on when conditions reduce their profits. On the economic side of the argument, land must be seen as more than an asset for production alone. It must be seen as the basis of livelihoods, security in the absence of social systems, as the basis of dignity, as part of building equity, as a major factor in identity and as the basis of citizenship. Furthermore, the economic issue is grounded in the collateral value of land which we know has all too often led to indebtedness and loss of land. (See ILC website session at ECOSOC in 2004).
7. The underlying contextual issue is whose interests are we working to protect and secure. Land security in all too many contexts is to attract foreign direct investments. For other powerful vested interests, tenure security is supported as they see it as a way for those holding "ill-gotten" land to legitimise their ownership. And after all the elites have succeeded to capture the benefits of most land administration systems - haven't they.
8. Another contextual concern is that land tenure models are dominated by both individual models of ownership, use and access and often displace or discredit, as romantic ideas from the past, the value of tenure systems vis a vis common property resources, land rights for pastoralists, issues of forest dependent people. These land tenure systems are not understood in terms of the huge numbers of people who rely on these systems and the contribution they make to rural economic growth and the multiplier effects of rural growth on urban livelihoods and national development.
9. Security of tenure is base in most developing countries on "received" law and legislation - meaning systems to protect settler communities (today transnationals, international extractive industries, other foreign investors - tourism may be the new settlers / neo-

colonialists). Received law meaning that land tenure systems that have served communities well for years are being made to fit into the received laws often from colonial periods. This needs to be turned around. Received, often now statutory systems need to be reshaped around local systems which in terms of the needs of the population, local tenure regimes may serve the vast majority.

10. The rural / agrarian agenda has become a land agenda and displaced the earlier agrarian reform agenda - this is crucial for many reasons, better known to you than me. But for instance. The AR agenda, today called genuine agrarian reform, saw the state take/being asked to take responsibility for the public good, meaning the use of its natural resources to serve the public good. It was based on a holistic concept of not only access to land but to the factor markets needed for production- credit, technology, input and output markets etcetera. Today, the land agenda is based on access by markets and similarly getting production factors by the market, and even if the state redistributes land without a market model, the peasant beneficiaries have to go to the market for the other factors where they can be exploited, become indebted and loose their land.
11. Another contextual feature is lack of accountability. The number of agreements about land rights is overwhelming but compliance with agreements is sadly missing. The need to establish standards, indicators and a LAND WATCH system that includes voices from communities is essential.
12. Half a century after the introduction of the Agrarian Reform the rural indigenous peasant population has doubled, despite the migration to the cities. Demographic pressures have lead to over-exploitation and soil erosion in rural communities. Even though the Agrarian Reform had a different character in each country, most of the third world countries had neither the capacity nor the will to invest in transforming productive conditions in rural areas. There has been little progress in building access roads to the communities or in providing irrigation systems and electricity is only recently reaching rural communities. The neglect of the rural area, combined with the opening up of the market to food imports as required by structural adjustment programs, has led to a notable decrease in the ability of indigenous-peasants to supply foodstuffs to urban areas due to their lack of competitiveness. By contrast, the expansion of industrial crops, and their insertion in international markets in accordance with free trade agreements (FTA), has enabled competitive prices and led to the sustained and rapid expansion of the modern agricultural frontier over the past years.
13. In several countries the conflict over land has a marked ethnic character. Indigenous landless peasants continue to migrate and settle on unexploited land whose non-indigenous owners claim rights over it, even though they do not work the land. The land conflict has sharpened the ethnic confrontation between indigenous and non-indigenous. The medium and large landowners complain that the indigenous rights are generating two classes of citizens: one, the indigenous people with preferential and privileged rights, who do not have to work the land to retain their property, nor do they pay tax on land; and two, the agricultural entrepreneurs (as they refer to themselves), with property titles, who pay taxes, generate employment and create wealth but suffer legal insecurity and violation of their property rights. Land then does not belong to those who work it but to those who have money to buy it, violating one of the principles of all Agrarian Reform.
14. Land policies are not linked to rural development policies. In general, no link is made between sectoral public policies related to energy, roads, health, education and those related to agriculture, land titling, the environment and the creation of transparent land markets. Despite the multi-sector discourse, public policies continue to be

compartmentalized, and have emphasized the commodity chains approach to the detriment of a spatial approach to rural territorial development, which has been shown to be more effective and meet more fully the demands of the local rural population.

15. In general, small rural producers continue to be regarded as non-viable within the framework of an open international economy. Most plans and government proposals, as well as international development agencies, see them as passive recipients of aid and compensatory policies. Secure access to productive land, which is capable of generating a surplus, and the introduction of rural territorial development are tasks yet to be achieved. This implies that the Agrarian Reform is not yet concluded, but remains a priority for both society and the state.
16. The increasing problem of landlessness and the continuing high levels of rural poverty in several countries make it imperative to fully implement the Agrarian Reform as a permanent process. While such land redistribution would not eliminate rural poverty it would certainly begin to tackle the escalating problem of landlessness, reduce extreme poverty and enhance food security. A drastic reduction of rural poverty requires new development strategies, which would be able to substantially raise rural investment particularly in the peasant sector, as well as a series of other productivity, employment and equity enhancing measures. To bring about such a transformation, we need major political changes and the achievement of a wide national and regional consensus for the implementation of such a program.
17. Our mission, as the International Land Coalition, is to work together with peasants and indigenous peoples, men and women, to increase their secure access to natural resources, especially land, and to enable them to participate at local, national, regional and international levels, in the policy and decision making processes that affect their livelihood. After ten years, the external evaluation that has recently been made to our work states that as an International Coalition – jointly with other initiatives – we have helped in increasing awareness of, interest in, and demonstrations of support for land reform on global, regional and national agenda. And we want to continue doing so and to improve our capacities.