

Editorial: by Bruce Moore, Director of the ILC

On June 7, 2008 I experienced first hand the plight of 300 families in San Jose Mocca, Guatemala forcibly evicted from the farm they have worked for generations. Both their land and their labour rights have been denied. Instead of the productive land promised, the landowner offered an unproductive hillside. When they organised to claim their rights as farm workers, they were removed. As I was leaving, an elderly woman asked: "Do rich people have more human rights than poor people?". We all have a responsibility to confront this question,

This same question was behind the UN adoption of the Declaration on the Right to Development in 1986, wherein states were given the obligation to "undertake, at the national level, all necessary measures for the realization of the right to development and (to) ensure, inter alia, equality of opportunity for all in their access to basic resources."

With the vast majority of the world's poor dependent on agriculture, the more precise expression of "equality of opportunity" may be "equality of access to land and fair employment conditions for farm workers".

If, as some officials suggest, governments now understand the need to secure the property rights of small holders and to provide access to the landless with productive potential, then we may ask:

- Why do so many governments, who have agreed and ratified agreements, not have sufficient political will to secure the rights of the land poor?
- Should there be global indicators to foster and measure progress toward fair and just access to land and how should they condition international support?
- How can political, economic and government institutions, controlled by the powerful non-poor, be reformed to serve the interests of the land poor?
- How can the powerless be empowered as rights holders and participants in national and local decision-making processes on who has the rights to use which land, for which purposes and under what conditions?

While outcome documents and government statements from international events linking land to economic, social and political development are encouraging, we must remember that similar intentions were written into international agreements of the 1970s and 1980s. Without accountability standards, small holders and the landless ask whether the words of today are any more likely to help them to achieve their rights than those of 35 years ago. Until then, the poor in Guatemala and elsewhere, have every reason to believe that the rich have more rights than the poor.

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