



**Brief Report on the  
International Conference on  
Agrarian Reform and Rural Development  
(ICARRD)**

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The **International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD)**, held in Porto Alegre from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2006, followed up on matters of interest to the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) "Rural Poverty and Environment" (RPE) programme, with a special focus on the issues of women's and young people's access to land and collective resource management.

ICARRD was organised by the Brazilian government and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to promote knowledge, dialogue and understanding on agrarian reform, rural development and rural poverty. During the event there were parallel discussion sessions on various subjects, such as women's access to land and productive resources, territories belonging to indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, territorial rights for indigenous peoples and more. The treatment of the issue of young people and their relationship to land was rather superficial, except for a paper dealing with young people's right to participate in agrarian reform<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile the question of women's access was given a high profile and preferential treatment in all of the debate scenarios.

On the second day, in honour of International Women's Day, ICARRD paid symbolic homage to rural women. A large group of Brazilian women gave a presentation at the event, with two representatives reading out a declaration of working women. At this time a manifesto, which had been prepared two days earlier, was read to all of the women attending the event.

The Conference ended on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March with the adoption of a final Declaration which requests that governments all around the world implement rural development policies that promote agrarian reform programmes that will favour the poor and excluded. It also reaffirmed that land and access to natural resources form the basis of sustainable rural development, and that they serve as guarantees for preserving cultures and the environment. Civil society organisations and social movements played a fundamental role at the Conference.

### **Relevant points**

1. It was stated that most of the world's poor are found in rural areas and that poverty therefore has a direct relationship with agricultural activity and with factors that condition the development of the agrarian economy. Insufficient and inadequate

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<sup>1</sup> "Agrarian Reform? Not without Youth!", *International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth (MIJARC)*.

access to land, water and natural resources is a primary cause of poverty and food insecurity.

2. Any policy for improving the rural poor's access to land must be linked to agrarian reform, not only to facilitate access to productive resources such as land, but also to promote social justice and dignity. Agrarian reform helps to reassess the traditional rights of indigenous peoples and to strengthen social cohesion and local governance.
3. Agrarian reform is an indispensable condition for rural development policies. The equitable redistribution of the heritage of the countryside broadens people's opportunities for participation and economic sustenance. These initiatives to improve people's access to land must be accompanied by a restructuring of the laws governing property rights, markets, credits and territorial development mechanisms.
4. There are indicators that the concentration of lands in the hands of the few does not bring the economic benefits that have been touted to date. On the contrary, it affects the economic growth of agriculture and is less beneficial than those agrarian structures that have more equitable distribution. Redistribution means fighting against the concentration of power and prestige in the hands of economic power groups.
5. The rural policies that govern agrarian reform and rural development must not ignore women and youth in the future. This is because the majority of the arable land in the world is in the hands of men, yet it is women who produce over 80 percent of the food in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. It also remains clear that the future of rural areas depends on the young, and we must ensure their secure access to the land through explicit public policies.
6. Policies that support women must aim to overcome the factors that are limiting their empowerment. In many cases, women's participation is scarce due to a lack of recognition of their rights as citizens, as well as to a lack of personal documentation. Many women do not participate in public or negotiation scenarios out of lack of habit. In other cases, violence and mistreatment within the home is a limiting factor.
7. Women are the direct victims of the unsustainable use of natural resources perpetrated by large capital holders. The consumerist economy presents a threat to the food security of rural families, pollutes the environment, does not respect bio-diversity and restricts peasant farmers' participation in agricultural markets.
8. Despite the existence of legislation that recognises women's right to land ownership - and this is a positive trend - there is no effective enforcement of these laws. The implementation process still needs support in order to ensure preferential access to and ownership of land for women. That is why one of the proposals set forth at the event is to develop strategies to accelerate women's access to land, and their sustainability will depend on the women themselves being able to defend their legally established rights. Otherwise, the mere adoption of legislation will not change the current reality that finds women excluded from land ownership.
9. It is absolutely necessary to enter into discussions about the conflict of formal laws with the common laws of indigenous peoples. There are conflicts between both regulatory frameworks, and the ways in which local communities handle their own natural resources are not recognised by the State. One notorious example of this is how the collective water use rights of the indigenous communities have no harmonious connection to the formal laws existing on the same issue.

10. It is necessary to strengthen community institutions without losing sight of the fact that they could be seriously flawed or eroded in some cases, or that they could shelter unjust and unequal practices, such as prejudices against women's access to land and natural resources. Giving legitimacy to local governance creates self-assessment, conscience and efficacy.
11. The handing over of authority for managing natural sources to the lowest levels of rural society will augment the fulfilment of their legally recognised rights. There will thus be better handling of conflicts over natural resources and property rights, although it will be necessary to promote appeal mechanisms to protect the rights of the most vulnerable, such as women.
12. We must explore new paradigms of alternative property rights to stand against the current myth of absolute private ownership. There is evidence that there is no marked separation between collective and private rights, but rather that they are complementary in distributing rights between family groups and the collective groups to which they belong. From this point of view, it is time to promote a more flexible administration of ownership rights, and thus strengthen the forms of self-governance already existing within rural populations.

To recap, ICARRD recognised the fundamental role that agrarian reform policies play in creating opportunities for rural populations to access the land and other natural resources on which they depend for their livelihoods. It was recognised that agrarian reform is not the only factor to consider in rural development, but it is without doubt one of the most important conditions, as it represents the equitable redistribution of material resources and promotes the distribution of power and prestige among the poor and excluded. It was also stated that to fight inequality it is necessary to include gender policies, since women play such a crucial role in producing food, despite not having access and ownership rights to and other productive resources. One factor that is affecting both men and women is the increasing privatisation of natural resources by monopolising sectors.

It was also suggested that the advances in legally recognising women's rights to access land and natural resources have not been effective. This has been due to a series of social, economic, cultural and even religious factors that continue to impede their ability to exercise their rights. As a result, we would need a number of empowerment mechanisms to turn women into effective social stakeholders in the exercise and defence of their rights. What women are demanding is state aid and counselling, respect for their rights, access to knowledge, voice and power, and that their common laws do not jeopardise the principles of gender equity.

Finally, new agrarian reform processes must include and recognise the positive practices of indigenous communities in handling and administering natural resources under their common laws, which have not as yet been recognised by the State. The traditional forms of governance used by rural communities are important to rural development, since they would be contributing to the efficient and sustainable management of natural resources. So in order to make progress along these lines, it will be necessary to revise the current paradigm of absolute, depriving and exclusive ownership and look towards promoting forms of governance that are based on the flexible handling of property rights between individuals and groups.

## **Lessons learned**

ICARRD was an appropriate stage for re-launching and placing agrarian reform and rural development on the public agenda. It seems as though there is renewed interest in including the peasant-indigenous and women's right to access land, water, forests and territories as top priorities in the struggle against rural poverty.

It was stated that there are studies and advances on the ways that indigenous peoples and communities manage their natural resources. According to these studies, there are efficient and sustainable local practices that have not been sufficiently recognised or supported. However, there is still a need for more studies on this matter and it seems that discussing these issues is still relegated to second place within the issue of rural development.

On the subject of gender, there have been significant advances, above all in the recognition of the great role that women play in the rural economy. Nevertheless, there is no significant data or indicators to support the argument for greater women's rights or of their relevant role in peasant farm production.

Very superficial treatment was given to the role of young people in rural development; there has been less progress in terms of generational inclusion. Thus, ICARRD was not a stage for discussing and sharing experiences about agrarian problems linked to younger generations, despite a general desire to know more about this issue.

In general, this has been a highly positive experience for Fundación TIERRA and it will surely serve to deepen the institution's work in terms of its current research, which is closely related to the issues covered at the Conference and those prioritised by the IDRC.