

THE POPULAR COALITION TO ERADICATE HUNGER AND POVERTY

THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF LAND RESOURCES

An Essential Building Block in National Food Security Planning

***A Discussion Paper for the Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue Session
Of the Eighth Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development***

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The Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty
Secretariat
c/o International Fund for Agricultural Development – IFAD
Via del Serafico, 107 – 00142 Rome, Italy
< Coalition @ifad.org >

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According to the United Nations:

The main tools of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development are policy and agrarian reform, participation, income diversification, land conservation and improved management of inputs (Chapter 14, Report of UNCED, June 1992).

Issues and Concern

From the Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972 through to the World Food Summit in 1996, international leaders and Heads of State have searched for solutions to mounting global crises. Of the many Summit conclusions, the one of most significance is that they are one and the same. The common crisis is poverty. If the Summit protocols were blended into one international plan, the call would be for action on the lack of access by the poor to productive resources, insufficient participation by the poor in decisions which affect their daily lives, the inequitable distribution of wealth and the need for reforms in macro-economic policies that adversely affect the poor.

Escaping from poverty is a constant challenge for the 800 million people who struggle to meet their basic food requirements on a daily basis. Sixty percent are rural people who live in environmentally sensitive areas of low productivity. Of these, it is estimated that over 350 million are landless or near landless. In many developing countries, access to land can provide the most viable opportunity for poor rural households to develop sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, the manner by which land is regulated, rights are assigned and conflicts are resolved determines the incentives and opportunities for the rural poor to:

- ensure their household food security;
- conserve and restore their agro-ecosystems;
- access financial services;
- earn income by producing marketable surpluses;
- accumulate capital and assets;
- use their own labour and investments to sustain the natural resource base;
- build reserves to cope with drought and preserve their assets during periods of agricultural stress; and
- invest in alternate livelihood options.

Sustainable food cycles are people-centred. Sustainable agriculture and rural development are essentially a function of the way people organise their social, environmental, economic and political systems to make the critical decisions on who has the rights to use which resources, in which ways, for how long and for which purposes. When property rights are lacking or insecure, for example, farmers can not be sure they will receive all the benefits resulting from their labour and investments and therefore lack the incentives to invest in sustainable practices of agriculture and land use. However, the vicious cycle that

links hunger and poverty to the degradation of natural resources can be broken, in large measure, by ensuring that the rural poor gain secure access to land, water, credit, information and technology.

Appropriate land tenure, land use and property rights can improve food security, increase the incomes of the rural poor, reduce landholding inequalities and prevent rural conflicts. Secure access to land, for example, can catalyse practices of sustainable resource use, improve soil management and contribute to combating desertification.

Nonetheless, despite these compelling economic and social arguments, the political and economic difficulties associated with land tenure reform have been formidable. Furthermore, in some cases, land reform has not been successful because the beneficiaries have not been involved and the only land provided was infertile. Fortunately, new opportunities are emerging that provide more favourable enabling conditions. These include the successful efforts of civil society, the rise of democratic institutions and increased political awareness of the consequences of continuing to neglect rural populations.

A growing body of knowledge confirms the existence of an inverse relationship between farm size, sustainability and productivity associated with many different forms of agricultural activity. This perspective reveals that land tenure reform not only contributes to social equity for smallholders but also contributes to the goal of Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) of *“increasing production on land already in use and avoiding further encroachment on land that is only marginally suited to cultivation”*(Chapter 14, *Ibid*). Furthermore, smallholders shelter family members thereby contributing to household food security.

Economic liberalisation is gradually eliminating the subsidies that often favoured large farmers. Land taxes are becoming more common as governments strive to develop their revenue base. Where large landholdings have served as a hedge against inflation, continuing to hold land for speculative purposes is becoming more costly. As a result, land is expected to come onto the market at prices that are more accessible to the rural poor. Improved approaches to land tenure systems, including market-assisted land reform, land leasing and alternative sharecropping systems, are examples of innovations aimed at providing secure access for the rural poor.

It is generally accepted that land degradation and soil loss threatens the livelihoods of millions of people and future food security, with implications for water resources and the conservation of biodiversity. In decision III/11 of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the international community recognised the need for an integrated and ecosystem approach¹ to the sustainable management of land and soils. Scientists and development practitioners recognise that the real causes of soil degradation are the imbalances in power, wealth, knowledge and access to resources. They recognise that the restoration of degraded lands and the protection of water, soils and forests requires that the poor acquire secure access to land and the related downstream services and productive resources.

However, in many places an historic urban bias continues to lead to the neglect of rural areas and peoples. Today, the number of rural poor are continuing to rise as they are joined by those being displaced due to processes such as the privatisation of common property land; the expansion of commercial agriculture and land/ethnic conflicts. There can not be sustainable agriculture and rural development where there is conflict over the land that must be managed.

¹ For instance, a Watershed Development Approach combines ecology, economy, equity and employment considerations.

Appropriate legislation is of vital importance. Of equal significance however, is the existence of the necessary monitoring, supervision and enforcement mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of laws and regulations at national and local levels. In some cases, even in countries with suitable land reform legislation, implementation is either slow, delayed or manipulated by the power of the landed class. Generally, the obstacles to land tenure reform are not technical, but institutional and political.

**Agrarian Reform = Land Tenure + Support Services + Good Governance
Resistance from Landowners²**

The history of agrarian reform has shown that civil-society movements lacking necessary institutional and public support and government-led reforms without the support of civil-society have both failed. And, the record from official development assistance affirms that sustainability requires that people are empowered to be the agents of their own development. Accordingly, there can not be empowerment of people if they do not participate in the decisions that affect them. At the same time, participation is meaningless if it does not result in improved access to productive resources. The need is for revitalised alliances linking governments and their civil-society organisations coupled with the moral and financial persuasion of the international community.

However, participation may be weak and easily manipulated unless effective institutions are developed that not only give a voice to farmers in setting sustainable policies, but that empower farmers to consistently engage decision-makers and build a broader base of public support. Without sustained dialogue it is unlikely that local governments will develop the political commitments needed for sustainable agrarian and agricultural sector reform. If farmers are to effectively encourage sustainable agrarian policies, the capacity of farmer organisations must be strengthened and alliances or coalitions must be forged with other like-minded organisations.

For some time, there has been a recognised need to foster new forms of partnership between civil society, governments and international organisations. The need is for multi-stakeholder partnerships aimed at enhanced information sharing, the creation of common agendas for action, strategic well-targeted public opinion campaigns, pilot projects that can build new ways of working together and better targeting of existing resources to the poor.

Today, land tenure reform and access to productive assets is re-appearing on national and international agendas based on the recognition of their importance to economic, social and political stability. Asset ownership by the rural poor is increasingly recognized as an essential requirement for broad-based economic growth. Social equity is gaining the stature of a global value. Good governance and political stability are being recognized as prerequisites to economic growth. And, the important contribution that traditional knowledge can make to the eradication of poverty and environmentally sustainable development is gaining greater recognition. Farm structures and land tenure patterns need to be adapted to the three objectives of increasing food production, promoting a wider distribution of the benefits of agrarian progress and minimising negative agro-ecological impacts on the natural resource base.

The potential for improved tenure arrangements to break the cycle of poverty and soil degradation is not new. For example, the commitments made by governments at the 1979

² While social relationships are complex and therefore do not lend themselves to formulas, the use of mathematical analogy can illustrate the components of the process that need to be incorporated into agrarian reform.

World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD) acknowledged that this understanding was global. Likewise, the Rome Declaration of the 1996 World Food Summit, agreed by acclamation by Heads of State and Governments, emphasised again the direct link between access to land, overcoming hunger and environmentally sustainable development.

It could be argued that the essential components of a programme of action have not change significantly. Both WCARRD and the World Food Summit give prominence to:

- poor rural people gaining access to land and water resources, agricultural inputs and services, extension and research facilities;
- community participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of rural development programmes;
- the structure and pattern of international trade and external investment being adjusted to facilitate the implementation of poverty-oriented rural development strategies; and
- the principle that growth is necessary but not sufficient, it must be buttressed by equity and people's participation.

The practical implementation of the principles and objectives of SARD requires action on a broad front supported by adequate resources. Such action should aim to unite local communities, NGOs, government institutions, the intergovernmental organisations and international financial institutions into a common and concerted strategy.

The international community has recognised the need for an integrated approach to the protection and sustainable management of land and soil resources which involves all peoples, non-governmental and community-based organisations and, in particular, women, whose vital role in rural well-being is frequently under-valued and denied support. This should include action to ensure secure land tenure for those with access and increase access to land, credit and training, as well as the removal of obstacles that inhibit farmers, especially small-scale farmers and peasants, from investing in and improving their lands and farms.

Particular opportunities must be established for indigenous peoples to benefit from their historical, integral and inviolable relationship with the land and other natural resources. For example, paragraph 26.1 of Agenda 21 recognises the "interrelationship between the natural environment and its sustainable development and the cultural, social, economic and physical well-being of indigenous people...", and 26.3 (ii) recognises "that the lands of indigenous people and their communities should be protected from activities that are environmentally unsound or that indigenous people concerned consider to be socially and culturally inappropriate;"

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, endorsed at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development³ (UNCED), gives emphasis to land tenure in successive chapters including those on *Combating Poverty, Management of Land Resources, Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development, and Strengthening the Role of Farmers*. With similar importance, the World Food Summit Plan of Action repeatedly draws attention to the inadequate access by the rural poor to the means of production including land, water, inputs, appropriate technologies and farm credit. These elements are reinforced by the mandate of The Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty, a coalition of civil-society and intergovernmental organisations, whose mandate is to revive agrarian reform through a holistic approach that incorporates land tenure, support services and participation by the rural poor in the formulation of public policies affecting the livelihood systems of their communities.

³ The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development is known as the *Earth Summit*

Institutional Action and Possible Partnership

Making a difference. The singular as well as collaborative actions of governments, civil-society and intergovernmental organisations can make a difference and produce sustainable solutions through such actions as:

1. Assisting governments to establish appropriate legal, regulatory and judicial frameworks that can register and protect people's resource rights;
2. Supporting alliances between sectors in order to build broad-based political and economic support for land tenure reform, access to factor inputs and protecting the natural resources base;
3. Initiating public education to create a citizenry informed of the fact that smallholder farms are potentially more productive and environmentally sustainable than large-scale commercial agriculture;
4. Strengthening the organising of rural communities into units of sufficient scale to support viable credit and marketing systems of interest to commercial service providers;
5. Leveraging the moral persuasion and financial conditionality of international organisations in order to place land and resource rights on national agendas;
6. Supporting consciousness-raising among landless and near-landless people of their rights and the possibilities for change;
7. Strengthening rural workers and peasant organisations, ensuring they are inclusive of women headed households, widows, indigenous peoples, lower castes and other marginalised population groups;
8. Promoting the "ratification and application of existing international conventions relevant to indigenous people and their communities and promote the adoption by the General Assembly of a declaration on indigenous rights"⁴;
9. Recognising the need to protect Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and strengthen the efficiency of indigenous peoples' resources management systems;⁵
10. Establishing coalitions of urban and rural peoples around such common concerns as the effects of the rural exodus on rural economies and its aggravating effects on urban poverty;
11. Establishing independent and accountable Land Commissions with adequate participation by potential beneficiaries;
12. Ensuring the registration of women's names on land records; ensure their rights are enshrined in communal property systems, protect/establish the inheritance rights of widows and daughters and promote representation by women in local decision-making bodies and land commissions;
13. Demarcating and protecting traditional forms of land tenure such as common property and pastoralist areas;
14. Promoting improved land management and soil conservation practises;
15. Halting the expansion of the agricultural frontier onto fragile lands;
16. Removing subsidies and tax provisions that provide distorting privileges to large-scale farmers;
17. Establishing land tax systems, especially for under-utilised land and land held for speculative purposes;
18. Developing methods to increase financing for land reform and post-land acquisition services including land banks, land for debt schemes and land for taxes;
19. Promoting innovative fora, conventions⁶ and opportunities for public debate on land rights and sustainable agriculture to improve rural livelihood systems;

⁴ Agenda 21 – 26.4

⁵ Agenda 21 – 26.5

⁶ for instance: "soil convention" promoted by IFOAM

20. Including beneficiary participation in land valuation processes and in determining repayment terms and conditions that accommodate the capacity of beneficiaries in terms of their available labour, production skills, the productive capacity of their particular parcel of land, their available technology and their projected profitability;
21. Strengthening land registries, cadastre systems and land survey methods;
22. Reducing leakage and improving service delivery by using rural peoples' organisations to deliver government support services;
23. Developing human capital by investing in rural schools, health facilities and extension services;
24. Strengthening the systems to collect, analyse and share knowledge of the new and innovative approaches to land reform that demonstrate the capacity to overcome the constraints experienced in earlier models of agriculture sector reform;
25. Elaborating participatory methods to assist governments and civil-society to monitor progress toward secure access to land and other productive assets in the context of the World Food Summit and the Commission on Sustainable Development.

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