

Foreword

Vast numbers of the world's poor work and live in rural areas. With few, if any, assets, they have little command over their livelihoods and are among the first to suffer the effects of environmental degradation and economic shocks. The search for solutions has brought the land reform question back onto national and international agendas.

The importance of property rights for the rural poor and their access to improved technology, credit and markets, as well as sustainable use of natural resources, have commonly been emphasized by donor agencies and governments throughout the past two decades. But the “redistributive” land reform agenda was largely forgotten until very recently. Providing access to land for agricultural workers and small producers, and formalizing land rights and entitlements of poor tenants, customary land users and indigenous peoples, together with improvement in production structures, have become as important as ever. And it is clear that rural labouring households need to be politically strong if they are to have any real influence over local decision-making processes affecting their livelihoods.

Land reform should remain an essential element of national agricultural and rural development strategies not only because land-based agricultural occupations must continue to provide livelihoods to a vast majority of the rural population, but also because macroeconomic growth in most contexts has failed to create improved prospects for the rural poor to acquire assets, gain employment, or increase their income and quality of life. On the contrary, government budgets for agriculture and rural development have been reduced; farmer co-operatives have disintegrated – especially in Latin America; the prior focus on tenancy improvements has been replaced by a focus on land markets and flexible labour conditions, and land prices have often escalated due to increased land speculation and population growth. Under these conditions, it becomes extremely difficult for the rural poor to access new productive land or maintain secure tenure unless there is a significant policy shift towards comprehensive land and tenure reforms based on popular participation.

The last few years have seen the implementation of market-based land reform programmes through financial and technical support from key international

agencies. Land banks have been established with the aim of offering credit to poor cultivators for the purchase of land. Although this approach has proven useful in some contexts, overall, it is uncertain whether there would be sufficient land on the market – on a voluntary “willing seller, willing buyer” basis – for the majority of the land-aspiring rural poor to gain access to. Furthermore, the costs of land purchase and titling are frequently onerous for small producers, especially given the fluctuating price of many agricultural products. The civil society sector remains highly critical of the market-based land reform approach, arguing that the initiative is prone to weaken organized popular demands for redistributive measures.

It is understandable that civil society groups are more actively expressing their frustration with the continual obstructions to the implementation of most of the land tenure reform measures adopted by various national governments. It has been persistently difficult for civil society to bring about changes in national and local power relations

So what precisely defines land tenure reforms at the beginning of the twenty-first century in different contexts? What are the specific land tenure legislations that are being implemented in the major regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America? And, what are the socio-political and economic complexities and experiences in seeking to implement extensive land reform measures? What roles have the state, market forces and donor agencies assumed? More precisely, what are the efforts that involve various civil society groups in the area of popular mobilization, networking and the actual implementation of specific land reform initiatives?

The present book attempts to provide essential information and critical analysis on many of these central questions. The preface, which summarizes key issues involved in empowering the rural poor through secure access to land and related sources, is followed by eight chapters of detailed analysis. As well as providing the main findings arising from regional experiences, Chapter one suggests possible areas of policy intervention. Chapters two through eight present perspectives from seven regions, namely: South-East Asia; South Asia; the Near East and North Africa; Southern Africa; West and Central Africa; Central America; and South America. These chapters are based on secondary sources as well as enumeration of specific cases dealing with civil society initiatives and social mobilization in their localities. Furthermore, each chapter seeks to examine

regional experiences in land tenure reforms by focusing on three to four countries in the region.

Bringing together historical, social and political complexities and experiences of land reform in diverse regional contexts in Asia, Africa and Latin America, combined with the results of a major questionnaire survey covering over 1,500 civil society organizations, the book demonstrates that, with varying nature and magnitude, land tenure questions are highly pertinent in all regions; government-led agrarian reform measures are usually insufficient to tackle current trends in rural landlessness and socio-economic vulnerability; market-assisted land reform policies are inadequate; various actors and institutions have a critical role to play in fostering land tenure reforms, but the question of who should do what and in which specific contexts is far from being agreed.

In particular, the book offers an extensive investigation of the role of civil society organizations in social mobilization and action for land reform. A common feature observed across the regions is the presence of a considerable number of civil society organizations undertaking various activities related to awareness-raising. They are active in resolving conflicts among producer groups, denouncing extreme cases of corruption and repression, lobbying politicians and government officials for improved tenure legislations and providing legal support to poor cultivators. In some cases, they have assisted tenants and indigenous peoples in acquiring formal land titles, as well as mobilizing poorer rural groups for land invasions. In a number of countries, civil society organizations have also participated in the execution of agrarian reform programmes by identifying beneficiaries, negotiating land prices and providing production services. But, on the whole, actions by civil society groups are spontaneous and small-scale, intended to manage the immediate and most pressing problems.

A major policy issue emerging from the study is that the overall capacity of civil society organizations needs strengthening if they are to be more effective in social mobilization and to actively participate in ensuing land tenure programmes and projects. In particular, the study emphasizes the need to strengthen peasants' representative organizations, such as rural trade unions, agricultural co-operatives, tenants and rural workers' associations, in addition to supporting NGOs and other civil society forces concerned with rural poverty and inequalities. Furthermore, it is vital that civil society groups working in the area of agrarian tenure reforms are provided with sustained minimum financial

resources. But they should also look into autonomous sources of funding through membership fees and co-operative enterprises, thereby reducing dependency on external institutions. Promoting autonomous, vibrant and lasting civil society actions in the context of agricultural and rural development is consistently more difficult than usually assumed.

The present book is the outcome of a joint collaborative effort between the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty – a unique consortium of civil society, governmental and intergovernmental organizations working to improve rural food security and sustainable livelihood systems that was established at the initiative of IFAD, which is currently housing it, and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). The two institutions together with IFAD have helped to set up a major agrarian reform network covering eight regions and over two dozen countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. UNRISD has guided the present book project through conceptual clarity, analytical input and co-ordination of chapter preparations by specialists. IFAD, through the Popular Coalition, has provided guidance from its field programmes and relations with civil society organizations.

It is our hope that the book proves a useful reference to civil society groups, community leaders, government decision-makers and international organizations on the issue of land reform and tenure security. It should also prove helpful for agricultural and rural development training programmes, as well as academic studies.

Lennart Båge
President
International Fund for
Agricultural Development
Rome

Thandika Mkandawire
Director
United Nations Institute for
Social Development
Geneva