

# Introduction

Empowering the Rural Poor  
through Land Reform  
and Improved Access to Productive Assets

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### **COMMITMENTS TO RESOURCE RIGHTS ARE NOT NEW**

The potential for resource rights to break the cycle of poverty and contribute to sustainable livelihood strategies has resurfaced regularly over the past 30 years.

The 145 government delegations to the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development declared in 1979 that developed and developing countries as well as the international community must contribute to the immense effort required to eliminate rural poverty. In the forward to the WCARRD programme of action, commonly called The Peasants' Charter, it is clearly stated that "the rural poor must be given access to land and water resources, agricultural inputs and services, extension and research facilities; they must be permitted to participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of rural development programmes; the structure and pattern of international trade and external investment must be adjusted to facilitate the implementation of poverty-oriented rural development strategies. Growth is necessary but not sufficient; it must be buttressed by equity and, above all, by people's participation...". (FAO, 1981:iii)

More recently the direct link between resource rights, particularly access to land, overcoming hunger and poverty was emphasized by the IFAD sponsored Conference on Hunger and Poverty in 1995 and the 1996 World Food Summit.

The Summits of the 1990s examined pending crises - the environment, development, energy, and food. Of the many conclusions, the one of most significance is that there are no separate crises. They are all one and the same. The single most important and common cause and effect is poverty resulting from unequal access and use of resources. If the protocols were blended into one international plan, the call would be for action on the inequitable distribution of wealth, the lack of access by the poor to productive resources, insufficient participation by the poor in decisions which affect their daily lives and the need for reforms in macro-economic policies that adversely affect the rights of the poor.

The Summit protocols highlight the re-occurring description of the poor as lacking assets, being vulnerable to agriculture and economic shocks, lacking the capacity (training and knowledge) to participate in decision-making affecting their livelihoods, and suffering from an inter-generational sense of being powerless to change their condition.

### COMPELLING ARGUMENTS ARE NOT ENOUGH

In spite of the social, economic, environmental and political arguments, efforts to implement pro-poor policies are often met with substantive obstacles. Even in countries committed to improving access to land and security of tenure, implementation is often slow, delayed or manipulated by the power of vested interests and landed classes. The culture of exclusion, exposed in the *Peasant's Charter*, has been reinforced in each of the post-1979 Summits.

This continuing situation casts grave doubts on the political commitments behind the *Right to Development*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, the *Earth Summit* and the *World Food Summit* with their emphasis on the right to resources and the right to food. For the rural poor these commitments are of growing importance.

The decade of the 1990s and its many summits provided renewed emphasis and policy commitments to reduce rural poverty. Greater emphasis is now placed on access to productive resources, devolution and local management of natural resources and the extension and strengthening of partnerships with civil societies to nurture and develop human assets. These new approaches emphasize local participation, supporting the construction of social capital and linking the rural poor to dynamic sectors of the economy. Participation allows the poor a voice, and through a transfer of responsibility gives them the power to discover and determine ways to improve their lives. Empowering the poor through secure access to resources is the foundation of rural poverty alleviation.

This policy shift envisions a new emphasis on resource rights and institutions: on the organizations (community-based organizations, rural workers, women's groups, indigenous peoples, fisher folk, producer associations) that mediate the access of the poor to assets, financial services, technologies and markets and on the rules (laws, customs and administrative practices) that determine whether the poor benefit from such access. The poor's chance to influence rules, and to help control organizations, depends on their power and solidarity. These, in turn, depend on their knowledge, access and, perhaps above all, whether alternative courses of action are open to them.

### PRO-POOR INSTITUTIONS ARE CENTRAL

The paradox is that, while the goal is to foster institutional change to help the poor acquire land and other assets, institutions, including the state, tend to be

controlled by the powerful non-poor. Often, those who control one institution also control others. For instance, even after land redistribution, the large farmer may continue to have better access than the ex-landless labourer to production, credit, information and marketing networks, and the capacity to diffuse and insure against risk. Can the poor and weak use, transform and benefit from those institutions, which were initially controlled by the rich and powerful and run mainly in their interest? What alternative or countervailing institutions need to be established or strengthened to advance and protect the access needs of the poor to productive resources and related upstream and downstream services?

The poor need to be empowered to represent and protect their interests. They must be able to restrain the non-poor and rural elites from arranging things to their own advantage. For this purpose, the poor must have a direct role in setting policies affecting access to natural resources and related factor markets. In some cases, the rural poor may benefit by uniting with the urban poor since out-migration from rural communities often has negative effects on the rural economy while simultaneously aggravating urban poverty.

In most cases, progress depends on whether the poor use their resources and power jointly, or are fragmented by distance, economic groupings, caste, ethnic group or gender. It also matters whether the poor can afford the time, costs and risks of political activism. They need support and solidarity of various forms along with the moral authority of credible partners, both domestically and internationally.

Institutions may often persist, but they are not immutable. Channelling appropriate resources such as land, education, and technology to raise the productivity of assets, and markets to improve sales and purchases for and from asset use, improve the options that over time may also help the rural poor to alter institutions for their sustained benefit. For instance, by changing the political structure in the village, resource redistribution gives more voice to the poor and induces them to get involved in local institutions and management of the local commons. It helps in overcoming the inter-generational sense of helplessness, which is itself a problem that needs specific attention. Communities need to be awakened to the realistic possibilities for change; aware of the systemic obstacles to be overcome; organized into viable people's organizations; educated to ways and means to achieve change; and, supported in their actions with the confidence of being in solidarity with others.

### THE GAP IS GROWING

Hunger is the daily struggle of 800 million people. It is also known that other indices, such as dollar-a-day poverty takes the numbers higher. Today, seventy percent of those who are unable to meet the food needs of their families are rural people living in environmentally sensitive areas of low productivity. Vast numbers are landless or near landless. And, their numbers are continuing to rise as they are joined by those being displaced due to such processes as the privatization of common property land, the expansion of commercial/mechanized agriculture and ethnic conflicts over land.

Historically, rural peoples have been neglected. Their food security challenge is growing as the poverty gap widens, both within and between nations. As the gap in access to productive resources grows, the gap becomes a greater threat to household food security, environmental sustainability and international peace. This alarming gap is a dramatic indicator of the imbalances that contribute to a culture of exclusion that denies the poor access to opportunities for development. In 1960, the top 20% of the world's population had incomes 30 times the poorest 20%. Today, the gap is 60 times. In a world of plenty, this is morally unacceptable and environmentally unsustainable.

It is ironic that those who are the food producers, largely farm labourers, are among those most vulnerable to food insecurity. For the rural poor, secure access to land provides the most realistic opportunity for rural people to improve their livelihoods and develop assets that can improve their resilience to shocks.

However, their negligible natural and capital assets compel them to adopt survival strategies with short time horizons. They become excluded from productive opportunities by ill-defined or non-existent property rights, limited access to financial services and markets, inadequate security against natural disasters, lack of education and training, and the lack of participation in decision-making. Understandably, when property rights are lacking or insecure, farmers can not be sure they will receive the benefits and thereby lack the incentives to make investments for the longer term.

The interactions between poverty, food security and resource rights are starting to bring about a re-focusing of national and international agendas on the revival of agrarian reform and resource tenure for agricultural communities as well as for fisher folk and coastal communities, forest dwellers, pastoralists and other traditional resource users.

It follows that access to productive resources and tenurial security can reduce landholding inequalities, prevent rural conflicts, contribute to improved food security and increase the incomes of the rural poor. Secure access to resources can catalyze practices of sustainable resource use and soil management including combating desertification.

Despite these convincing reasons, few countries have undertaken major agrarian reform measures. In many countries, the political and economic difficulties associated with land reform have been formidable since land tenure and property rights touch on the fundamental inequities in rural societies.

### NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Fortunately, new opportunities are emerging that can create more favourable enabling conditions. These include the efforts of civil society, the rise of democratic institutions and increased political awareness of the consequences of continuing to neglect rural populations. Resource rights are returning to national agendas based on a recognition that agrarian sector reform is a pre-requisite to economic, social and political stability. Asset ownership by the rural poor is increasingly recognized as being essential to sustained and broad-based economic growth.

In rural areas of most developing countries, land is not only the primary means for generating a livelihood, but also the vehicle to accumulate capital and transfer it between generations. The manner by which land is regulated, rights are assigned and conflicts are resolved affects:

- ▶ the ability of households to produce for their subsistence and to generate marketable surpluses;
- ▶ the social and economic status of rural families including their collective identity;
- ▶ the incentives for the rural poor to exert their own effort, to make investments and sustain the natural resource base;
- ▶ the opportunity for the poor to access financial services; and,
- ▶ the capacity of families to build reserves to protect their assets during periods of agricultural stress.

It is generally accepted that the real causes of rural poverty are the unequal distribution of land; low agricultural productivity; population growth; low absorption rates for rural labour; limited opportunities for alternative income; and, in some cases commercial agricultural development.

Clearly, the policy and regulatory frameworks that prevent the poor from acquiring resources and building assets, both physical and human, has a critical bearing on the social fabric of societies and on overall economic development. From the standpoint of the poor, the past failures of trickle down economics must give rise to bottom up participation. Empowering the poor means supporting them to achieve secure resource rights and fostering their direct participation in the integrated planning and management of land, water and common property. Resource management strategies in the past tended to neglect social, economic and institutional factors and concentrated almost exclusively on the technical aspects of production.

Today, enlightened decision-makers are beginning to understand the interactions between poverty, land rights, the sustainable use of natural resources and economic development. The multiplier effect of investments in agriculture and the rural sector on the wider economy are slowly becoming understood. And, the productivity and livelihood potential of smallholder agriculture, over larger scale and commercial agriculture, is a contributing factor in the efforts to revive agrarian reform.

Agrarian reform is most often considered to define property relationships since it involves a wide range of technical elements. However, first and foremost resource reform is about sustainable development. Sustainable development is essentially about people and the way they organize their social, economic and political systems to make the critical decisions on who has the right to use which resources, in which ways, for how long and for which purposes.

Resource reform is primarily about changing relationships. First, it aims to change access and tenure relationships. Second, it aims to change the current culture of exclusion so that the poor gain access to credit, technology, markets and other productive services. Third, it aims for the poor to be active participants in the development of government policies and programmes affecting their communities and livelihoods.

While social relationships are complex and therefore do not lend themselves to formulas, the use of a mathematical analogy can illustrate the interactive elements of any strategy for resource reform.

Resource Reform = Secure Access and Tenure + Support Services + Participation

Resistance from Vested Interests and the Landed Class

The history of agrarian sector reform has shown that:

- ▶ civil-society movements without institutional and public support or government-led reforms without the support of civil society have both failed;
- ▶ social change proceeds technological and economic transformation;
- ▶ sustainability requires that people be empowered to be the agents of their own development; and,
- ▶ approaching agrarian reform through narrow interventions, as a means to initiate broader policy dialogue and programme support, is seldom successful.

#### **OPENING SPACES FOR DIALOGUE AND JOINT ACTION**

For some time, there has been a recognized need to foster new forms of partnership and more open spaces for dialogue between civil society, governments and international organizations. The need is for information sharing, to promote dialogue among affected groups and to contribute to consensus building. There is also the need for joint pilot projects that can build new ways of work. The goal of opening more space for dialogue among stakeholders is greater coherence in targeting resources to the location specific obstacles confronting the poor.

At the 1995 Conference on Hunger and Poverty, sponsored by the International Fund for Agriculture Development, a diverse group of stakeholders, including inter-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, NGOs, government officials, bilateral agencies and international financial institutions produced a consolidated analysis on the constraints to sustainable agriculture and rural development. They called for the revival of agrarian reform on national and international agendas. They committed themselves to form a Popular Coalition that would unite their common concerns into one agenda to empower the rural poor through improved access to productive assets.

The Popular Coalition aims to build strategic and innovative alliances between diverse development organizations giving particular emphasis to the role of civil society in gaining access to land and water and related productive assets and by increasing their direct participation in decision-making from the local to the international level.

The Popular Coalition's programme of action is informed by three key lessons from the past:

- ▶ the need for a broad based and comprehensive approach to agrarian reform involving consensus building and policy dialogue;

- ▶ the political sensitivities involved in agrarian reform will require that the viability of the proposed approaches have been well demonstrated before policy makers will consider adopting reform on a large scale; and,
- ▶ the need to strengthen the capacity of community organizations so that they can become effective interlocutors with their government for policy development and to execute programme delivery.

#### ELEMENTS OF A PLATFORM FOR ACTION

Within both civil society organizations and intergovernmental and international financial institutions there is a growing number of influential persons who share a common interest in building broad-based political and economic support for land tenure reform, access to factor inputs and protecting the natural resources base. These are the key actors who need to be engaged in ongoing dialogue in order to influence the internal policies and practises of these institutions and governments. This is an important group of stakeholders to engage in evaluating emerging land tenure markets and civil society experiences in land reform. This is a group that can have an influence on the incorporation of civil society experiences into government land policies and practises.

It is not at all uncommon to find that advocacy campaigns for land reform confront a long entrenched view that large-scale, commercial agriculture is more productive and that reform will only fragment land into unproductive, small units. There is a need to educate decision makers to the benefits that can accrue from smallholder agriculture. The benefits, among others, include increased aggregate food production; higher levels of employment for farm and family labour; improved practices of soil, water and resource management and multiplier effects in both the rural and urban economy.

The environment, global warming, global conflicts and civil wars, migrants and refugees are among those issues that are increasingly common preoccupations of citizens of every country. Access to land and tenure security has a direct bearing on each of these issues. These issues increasingly touch on the self-interests of all countries and thereby form a basis for building a global citizens movement for resource rights.

The common ground that unites stakeholders to the cause of resource rights all too quickly fades as the modalities for implementation are debated. There is the need to strengthen multistakeholder coalitions and systems to collect,

analyze and share knowledge of the new and innovative approaches to land reform in order to demonstrate their capacity to overcome the constraints experienced in earlier reform models. It is important to test the viability of scaling up the experiences of civil society into national initiatives. There is also need to test emerging land tenure markets (negotiated/market assisted, sharecropping, leasing, corporate farming) to understand the features of these forms of land use that can provide the opportunity for the poor to gain and maintain access to land and related assets.

Governments that have risen to the challenges of agrarian reform often need assistance from the international community. Reluctant governments need to receive strong encouragement to act on the same subjects. Among others, these include:

- establishing appropriate legal, regulatory and judicial frameworks that can register and protect people's resource rights;
- implementing land literacy programmes to inform the population of their rights and how they can be exercised;
- ratifying and implementing international conventions on people's rights to resources;
- establishing independent and accountable Land Commissions with adequate participation by potential beneficiaries;
- 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;
- reform macro-economic policies that privilege large-scale farmers;
- develop methods to increase financing for land reform and post-land acquisition services including land banks, land for debt schemes and land for taxes; and,
- develop human capital by investing in rural schools, health facilities and extension services.

First and foremost it must be recognized that the rural poor need strong representative organizations that they control and who can lead them in their struggle for resources.

Support is needed by rural peoples organizations in order to:

- support consciousness-raising among landless and near-landless people of their rights and the possibilities for change;

- ▶ strengthen rural workers and peasant organizations, ensuring they are inclusive of women headed households, widows, indigenous peoples, lower castes and other marginalized groups;
- ▶ protect indigenous knowledge and support indigenous peoples' resources management systems;
- ▶ demarcate and protect traditional forms of land tenure such as common property and pastoralist areas;
- ▶ promote and support improved land management and soil conservation practises;
- ▶ ensure 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;
- ▶ reduce leakage and improve service delivery by using rural peoples' organizations to deliver government support services; and,
- ▶ leverage the moral persuasion and financial conditionality of international organizations in order to place land and resource rights on national agendas.

While commitments to the resource rights of the rural poor are not new, there is an emerging consensus on the underlying contribution of resource right to durable solutions to poverty, food security, conflict resolution and the environmentally sustainable management of the world's eco-systems. This understanding of the importance of secure access to land and legally enforceable tenure is new. It provides the basis to forge a global movement that crosses sectoral interests in ways that were previously not envisioned.

For the poor in the cities and in the countryside development means opportunity. For the rural poor opportunity means access to land. What we need now is to move from a system in which the poor participate in officially led reform programmes towards one in which governments and external donors support people-initiated reform programmes. This must be the true objective of all of us: the empowerment of the poor by supporting their struggles to gain and thereafter sustain their access to land and related livelihood resources.

**REFERENCE:**

FAO 1981.

The Peasant's Charter: The Declaration of Principles and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, Rome.