Land Reform

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Abstract

This chapter traces how land policies and particularly land reform have gained, lost, and regained prominence in development strategies and debates since the Second World War. The authors begin with definitions and summarize the experience of land and agrarian reforms during the Cold War period. The next section traces the decline and resurgence of land policies following the Cold War, and the sometimes fierce debates between advocates of state-led redistributive land reforms and market-led reforms. The final section introduces contemporary issues and debates on gender and generational issues in land policy, as well as the contemporary “rush” involving large corporate land deals, and concludes with reflections on the new ideas of food and land sovereignty driving today’s agrarian movements. Redistributive land reform for the twenty-first century is argued to be one that is linked to broader visions of development, as were land reforms during the 1920s to 1970s.

Keywords: land, land reform, agrarian reform, redistributive land reform, market-led agrarian reform

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Introduction

In the past century, land reform has played a massive, central role in the time-paths of rural and national poverty, progress, freedom, conflict and suffering. For the next half-century at least, where agriculture continues central to the lives of the poor, the role of land reform will not decline. (Lipton 2010: 10)

Given the predominance of agricultural production and employment in the economies of developing countries, it is not surprising that land has been both an important issue in development theories and debates and a major arena of rural social and political movements and agrarian conflict. In the early history of development thought it was widely recognized that access to land is crucial to poor people’s capacity to construct viable livelihoods and overcome rural poverty, and also that existing structures of land tenure were often serious obstacles to improving farm productivity (Jacoby and Jacoby 1971; Warriner 1969). It was also recognized that patterns of landholding were major correlates of political power structure, social hierarchy, and economic relations in poor agrarian economies (Ghose 1983: 3).
This chapter uses both classic and contemporary literature to trace how land policies, and particularly land reform, have gained, lost, and regained prominence in development strategies and debates since the Second World War. We start with some issues of definition, and continue with the experience of land and agrarian reforms during the Cold War period. The next section traces the decline and resurgence of land policies during the post-Cold War decades and the sometimes fierce debates between advocates of state-led redistributive land reforms on the one hand and market-led reforms on the other. In the final section we introduce some contemporary issues and debates on gender and generational issues in land policy and the contemporary “land rush” involving sometimes spectacularly large corporate land deals, and conclude with reflections on the new ideas of food and land sovereignty driving today’s agrarian movements.

**Land reforms and agrarian reforms**

The redistribution of property in land is a very difficult change to carry through . . . it is inevitably a political question. (Warriner 1969: xv)

Land reforms generally are efforts to correct what are seen as historical distortions in the allocation of land ownership and use rights. These distortions may have resulted from
colonial land grabbing and dispossessions, enclosures, landlordism, or previous reforms themselves (such as some forms of socialist collectivization). It is therefore not surprising to see that national land policies have been shaped by the historical experience of different countries. Land reform objectives also tend to include a broader macro-economic aim of enhancing farm productivity and the farm sector’s contribution to overall economic development: reformed land tenure structures are usually expected to promote agrarian transition (whether to capitalist, modernized, smallholder, or collective systems).

The generally accepted definition of land reform as “redistribution of property or rights in land” has not changed much in the past half-century. Normally definitions include some notion of the intended beneficiaries (small farmers, entrepreneurs, the landless, farm workers, labor tenants, women, the youth, the rural poor). Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz (2002: 279) define land reform as including

not only redistributive reforms of ownership rights, but also the establishment of collective or communal forms of farming, state-sponsored land colonization schemes . . . and land tenure reforms, i.e., changes in the contractual arrangements between the landowner and those who cultivate the land. In addition, tax (and credit) measures intended to create incentives for large landowners to sell part of their holding sometimes are described as “market friendly” land reforms.
A conventional definition of *redistributive* land reforms is more restrictive, referring specifically to “programmes that redistribute land ownership from large private landowners to small peasant farmers and landless agricultural workers . . . [and] are thus concerned with a redistribution of wealth” (Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz 2002: 280). One could reasonably argue for inclusion, in a non-normative definition, of those upside-down land reforms—of which there are many historical and some contemporary examples—in which land rights have been taken from the poor and given to the rich.

Most frequently, land reforms have aimed to establish or consolidate a large and solid class of viable, market-oriented, and surplus-producing peasants. This was true not only of the East Asian “success stories” of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, but also of the first stages of socialist land reforms (prior to collectivization) in the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba, and Ethiopia (Lipton 2010: 192–94). Ajit Ghose, summarizing these experiences in the early 1980s, observed:

> A revitalisation of the peasantry is a necessary first step . . . irrespective of the nature of the new system: whether it is a capitalist, modernised peasant economy or a collective system. . . . [T]he immediate task of agrarian reform is to establish the peasantry as the principal actor on the rural scene. (Ghose 1983: 17)
It is common to distinguish land reforms (which aim to alter structures of access to land) and agrarian reforms, a more comprehensive approach that, besides (and sometimes even instead of) land reform, aims to promote access of landholders to the various inputs (knowledge, credit, markets) they need to increase productivity and enhance sustainable livelihoods.

The land reform vs. agrarian reform distinction is problematic for at least two reasons. First, any successful land reform is necessarily accompanied by the other supporting measures mentioned above, if they were not already in place, rendering the distinction redundant. Second, as Erich and Charlotte Jacoby noted four decades ago, the distinction is untranslatable in many world languages—“land reform in French is réforme agraire, and in Spanish reforma agraria” (Jacoby and Jacoby 1971: xiv–xv). The notion of “agrarian reform” does, though, serve the purpose of emphasizing the inadequacy of redistributive land reform by itself in bringing about lasting, structural change in the rural economy and society.

The leading international agency concerned with land issues is the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), but the World Bank also has exercised powerful influence over land policy thinking and programming in recent decades. The FAO held a major World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in 1979. Paradoxically, this occurred not long before international and national efforts at land reform
began to decline (from the early 1980s onwards), for a number of reasons, principally Structural Adjustment with the emerging dominance of neoliberal frameworks and the rollback of the state.

**Land reforms during the Cold War**

In the first three decades after the Second World War, various models of land and agrarian reforms were implemented. These were the agrarian components of the multiple different models of “development” that co-existed at the time, from purely capitalist to purely socialist, plus a variety of in-between models, all of them at that time still in the “mainstream” in contrast to recent decades in which a single, broadly neo-liberal model has dominated.

Doreen Warriner, who was associated with the UN FAO’s promotion of land reforms from the 1950s onwards, observed how land reform became “an instrument of the cold war, used by Russia and China to promote communism and by America to prevent it,” and noted the “stimulating and also stupefying interaction of conflicting ideologies” in this period (Warriner 1969: 37). Cold War politics made its own contribution to confusion about the concept and theory of land reform. The United Nations Economic and Social Council even dropped “land” from the definition of land reform when it adopted a resolution in 1962.
defining such reform as “an integrated programme of measures designed to eliminate the obstacles to economic and social development arising out of defects in the agrarian structure”. The definition, as Erich and Charlotte Jacoby (1971: 25) note, “reflects the efforts of the West to prevent land reform being considered identical with land redistribution as the East claimed,” typifying the “slipshod approach to land reform which almost paralysed the United Nations agencies in charge of the programmes”.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union showed rather inconsistent attitudes to reform, depending on the political context. For some decades the United States backed redistributive “land to the tiller” models in some countries, involving confiscation of excess holdings and their redistribution to smallholders, and revisions in tenancy laws enabling tenants and sharecroppers to become owners of their plots. The best known examples are those of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The theoretical basis for this kind of “classic land reform” was set out by (among others) Lipton (1974). Many other countries tried to replicate these models, often with support from the West (Christodoulou 1990; Walinsky 1977). But these attempts were generally only partially successful and in many cases outright failures. At the same time, however, U.S. sponsorship of land reform was almost absent in countries where U.S. firms owned large farms, and opposition to land reform was a motive for U.S. support for the overthrow of the governments of Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and Allende in Chile in 1973.
From the late 1960s onwards, the U.S. downplayed strategies based on politically-difficult land reform in favor of “green revolution” small-farm modernization through adoption of the new high-yielding varieties of maize and rice and purchased inputs. Other organizations that had sponsored advisory missions on land reforms also shifted their interest at about this time. But there were several notable exceptions in which land-to-the-tiller reforms were thought necessary to forestall rural communist revolution. In this the U.S. government was influenced by Roy Prosterman’s “index of rural instability,” a theory claiming that when landlessness reached 40 percent of rural households, radical rural insurrection was likely to ensue (Prosterman 1976). The United States supported land-to-the-tiller reforms for this reason, with Prosterman as advisor in (among others) the Philippines, South Vietnam, and El Salvador.

Meanwhile, several countries chose the path of collectivization (China, North Vietnam, Cuba), usually in stages beginning with a land-to-the-tiller and cooperativization phase, as noted above. China and the Soviet Union were also prominent in supporting the establishment of collective agriculture in the countries in their orbit of influence. However, one should not oversimplify the support for such reforms in the Cold War period. The Soviet Union tolerated a large private peasant sector in Poland, and the reversion from collectivism to peasant farming in Yugoslavia from the early 1950s (Lipton 2010: 321).
Many post-colonial land reforms in this period (both capitalist- and socialist-oriented), like the colonial upside-down reforms before them, involved the declaration of the state as the ultimate, sovereign owner of all land and other natural resources. As recent concern and research on large-scale corporate land acquisitions have shown, this often leaves cultivators under “customary” forms of tenure especially vulnerable to dispossession and eviction when large-scale investors (transnational or domestic) make deals directly with governments for the purchase or lease of large expanses of land, through the legal manipulations that “render untitled (but traditionally occupied and used) lands as unowned, and the state, by default, their legal owner” (Wily 2012: 752).

Decline and resurgence in development agendas

In the early 1990s the Bangladeshi economist Rehman Sobhan noted the disappearance of land reform from international development agendas: “The multilateral agencies, once in the vanguard of the intellectual movement for land reform, now mention such proposals for reform not at all or in highly qualified small print” (Sobhan 1993: 3). Byres (2004) notes the virtual disappearance of land reform from policy agendas during the 1970s and 1980s and its reappearance in “market friendly” form in the 1990s. The end of the Cold War led to decollectivization and a new wave of privatizing land reforms in many post-
socialist/transitional countries (Spoor 1997). Since 2000, many new land projects of the
World Bank and USAID have focused on “land administration,” not involving direct
redistribution of land rights from large landowners to small peasant farmers or the landless,
but aiming to improve the legal, technical, and institutional framework for land ownership,
with the object of promoting “tenure security” and the working of land markets.

In Africa, land reform receded with the introduction of structural adjustment programs
through the 1980s, together with the closure of state farms and withdrawal of state roles in
input and output markets. By the early 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the end of the
Cold War, it was making a return as part of interventions geared toward market reforms to
stimulate agriculture. The World Bank report Land Policies for Growth and Poverty
Reduction devoted only 14 pages to redistributive land reform policies (Deininger 2003: 143–
56), compared to 125 pages on the need to establish secure property rights to land and to
make these rights easily transferable through “free” land markets from less to more efficient
producers (Deininger 2003: 7–132).

The World Bank’s position has been described variously as “market-assisted land reform”
(MALR), “market-based land reform” (MBLR), and “market-led agrarian reform” (MLAR).
Its main proponents, Klaus Deininger and Hans Binswanger, defined the four key elements of
the World Bank’s land policy as: promotion of owner-operated family farms on both
efficiency and equity grounds; secure property rights to land so as to enhance owners’ effort and investment and facilitate land transactions; a policy and regulatory environment that promotes transfers to more efficient land uses; and a role for egalitarian asset distribution and redistributive land reform where the agrarian structure is highly dualistic, characterized by very large and very small holdings (Deininger and Binswanger 1999: 2).

This shift from classic state-led land reform to MLAR has been influenced by the so-called evolutionary theory of land rights. This application of the neoclassical theory of induced institutional innovation holds that rising scarcity and values of land or other resources, when reaching the point where the benefits of private ownership outweigh its costs, will lead to institutional innovation in the form of the creation of private property rights in those resources (Hayami and Ruttan 1985; Fitzpatrick 2006: 998). The evolutionary theory provides the theoretical justification for market-led or market-assisted (rather than state-led) land reforms, in which the main role of the state is seen as the provision of land titling programs and the promotion of a level playing field in which the market can do its work of bringing together “willing buyers” and “willing sellers.” Another powerful advocate of intervention to promote private property rights is Hernando de Soto, whose influential book *The Mystery of Capital* advocates land titling programs to bring poor rural people with informal smallholder tenure into the formal system, allowing them to use their land titles to acquire working capital through bank loans (de Soto 2000). Several recent policy reforms in
African countries have been framed as ways to empower the poor through titling their “dead capital.”

Belgian economist Jean-Philippe Platteau’s influential (1996) critique of the evolutionary theory found it wanting both as an exposition of historical processes and as a normative basis for structural reform based on individual, private property rights. The theory loses credence when confronted with the reality of property systems in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which—despite growing competition for resources—remain “plagued by widespread legal uncertainty, resource conflicts, and environmental degradation . . . in many contexts, relatively viable resource-governance regimes have reverted to open access notwithstanding conditions favourable to the creation of property rights” (Fitzpatrick 2006: 999). The World Bank statement on land policies recognizes one part of the problem, noting that “there are many cases where the vicious cycle of increased scarcity of land leading to more precise definition of property rights has not materialized, but instead conflict has arisen” (World Bank 2003: 9). Another problem is that registration (titling) of individual property rights in land is not a neutral process, typically favoring certain more influential categories of cultivators and excluding others (among them women), and may ultimately create less and not more security of tenure (Platteau 1996: 39–49).
Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom’s major contribution to the understanding and strengthening of property rights held in common was showing that competition, conflict and resource depletion were not the inevitable outcomes of increased scarcity—the commons need not be a “tragedy.” She drew attention to the durability of common property regimes that govern the sustainable use of common pool resources like grazing lands, forests and forest products, water, rivers, and marine resources—resources which are central to the livelihoods of most of the world’s rural population. Privatizing these resources through titling is not the only policy option. Ostrom’s work demonstrated that stable resource use can be achieved through collective self-governance by users themselves, by adopting what she described as eight principles for managing common property resources: clearly defined boundaries, locally appropriate rules regarding use and harvesting, user participation in decision making, systems for monitoring that are accountable to users, appropriate sanctions for violation of rules, cheap and accessible systems for dispute resolution, enabling the community of users to define itself, and to build nested institutions at different levels, on the basis of local common property regimes (Ostrom 1990).

In response to this and other work defending common property against private titling, the World Bank, for some time a major supporter of conversion of lands held in customary tenure to individual ownership titles, has now partly retreated from the “de Soto” position, especially for Africa. “[In] many traditional tenure systems, households undertake
investments that range from marking boundaries to planting trees . . . Increasing security of tenure does not necessarily require issuing formal individual titles . . . [M]any studies indicate that in Africa formal land title had little or no impact on either investment or farm income” (Deininger 2003: 37, 39). The experiences of Brazil, Colombia, and South Africa, considered success stories by proponents of market-led reform, suggest that the model simply does not work in the manner predicted by its proponents, and the market cannot replace the redistributive function of the state (Borras 2003).

In an article that provoked much debate in the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Griffin, Khan, and Ickowitz (2002) set out the case for radical redistributive land reform as an alternative to market-assisted reform. These authors argue that confiscation of land holdings is a key element in successful land reforms. By themselves, market-friendly experiments are unlikely to make major inroads into landlord power or distribution of holdings. Fragmented labor markets and systems of labor control prevent land markets from working in favor of the poor, and thus bring limited change in the distribution of landholdings. Debate concerning the theoretical coherence and empirical outcomes of market-assisted reforms appears to be growing and fracturing, as the scope of debate extends beyond the mechanisms for the acquisition of land and the selection of beneficiaries to its location within processes of agrarian and even macroeconomic change.
Arguments for and against various types and directions of land reform are part of the larger underlying debate on the respective merits of large- and small-scale agriculture. Contrasting views on land reform reflect the tensions between opposing standpoints on small-farm viability and the future place of small-scale agriculture in globalized food (and fuel, feed, and fiber) regimes. Rural social movements campaign for the small-scale alternative and claim that it can both provision the world, and do this in environmentally-friendly ways. This alternative is argued to generate more employment for local people than large-scale, energy-intensive monocrop farming, which tends to have an “enclave” character, with only a few exceptions such as horticulture. For example, La Via Campesina, the world’s largest and most influential alliance of peasant movements, insists that “small-scale farmers can feed the world and keep the planet cool” (La Via Campesina 2009, 2010). Quite authoritative scientific support for the viability and potential of smallholder futures comes from the important but largely unnoticed international study conducted by the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), Agriculture at a Crossroads. This report, which drew on the expertise of about four hundred specialists from all over the world, concludes that industrial, large-scale monoculture agriculture is unsustainable and must be reconsidered in favor of agro-ecosystems that combine mixed crop production with conserving water supplies, preserving biodiversity, and improving the livelihoods of the poor in small-scale mixed farming (IAASTD 2009). Further support may be found in the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food on
agroecology as scientific framework to “facilitate the transition towards a low-carbon, resource-preserving type of agriculture that benefits the poorest farmers” (UN General Assembly 2010b: 3).

If we take seriously the potential of small-scale farming as the basis for an agricultural future, we need to distinguish between the failures of conception and realization of the original redistributive land reform agendas (particularly as influenced and distorted by Cold War agendas) and “the possibility of reappraising such reforms as an instrument for modernization, technological diffusion, development and democracy as part of a sustained assault on rural poverty” (Sobhan 1993: 3). Notwithstanding its problems, Lipton reminds us, “at least 1.5 billion people today have some farmland as a result of land reform, and are less poor, or not poor, as a result. But huge, inefficient land inequalities remain, or have re-emerged, in many low-income countries. Land reform remains both unfinished business (Walinsky 1977) and alive and well (Lipton 2010: 8).

(Trans)national agrarian movements

In the 1990s a convergence of political processes and events jump-started a renewed interest in redistributive land reforms globally. The post-authoritarian regime in Brazil passed a land
reform law in 1988 that has become a key institutional anchor for the mobilization and land occupation campaign by the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST). Around the same time, the post-Marcos government in the Philippines enacted a new land reform law around which nation-wide land claim-making campaigns by poor peasants were launched and sustained. The regime transition from the apartheid era in South Africa has resulted in some significant concessions for the poor, including the 1994 land reform law that in turn inspired, at least for a short while, the birth of a national landless people’s movement. In Zimbabwe, the issue of land and land redistribution was central to the 1980 regime transition, albeit initially with a limited, market-assisted land reform combined with resettlement program. But in the mid-1990s, a spark for a nationwide agitation for land occurred that would ignite the controversial fast-track land reform beginning in 2000. The 1998 regime transition in Indonesia similarly opened up institutional reforms that would encourage further mobilization by the rural poor to claim land. Other places where significant calls and mobilizations for various forms of redistributive land policies have occurred during this period include Chiapas, Honduras, Guatemala, India, Bangladesh, and East Timor.

The rise of transnational agrarian movements that are in turn linked to local-national movements mobilizing for redistributive land policies has amplified the demand for redistributive land reform in the twenty-first century. La Via Campesina coordinated key (sub)national campaigns for land and aggregated them at the regional and international level
to extend the political reach of local and national campaigns. Launched in 1999, La Via Campesina’s Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform (GCAR) has been framed against the World Bank’s MLAR and aims to promote redistributive land reform. In 2006 this campaign found expression in the successful International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, which issued a progressive declaration and vision for land reform.

National campaigns for redistributive land policies have resulted in varied outcomes, with Zimbabwe and the Philippines posting the most significant results in terms of percentage of redistributed lands in relation to total agricultural lands, and number of beneficiaries relative to total rural populations. The Brazilian land reform, while frequently in the global media limelight, did not cover as much of the total agricultural lands and rural population, while the South African land reform has achieved much less. Many land reform settlements established in the past or recently, from West Bengal to Brazil, from Mozambique to the Philippines, have been targeted by corporate land grabbers. Indeed, the current phenomenon of land grabbing has reaffirmed the relevance of land reform, but has also exposed existing land reforms as an inadequate land policy response, as we argue below.
Current issues and debates

Among many currently hot issues and debates on land policy, space allows us to mention only three.

**Gender issues in land policy**

Land for women has to do with survival; for men it has to do with power . . . the men will be the first ones to oppose our participation in land tenancy.

(A Mayan woman NGO worker in Guatemala, quoted in Deere and de Leal 2001: 1)

Are you suggesting that women be given rights to land? What do women want?

To break up the family?

(India’s Minister of Agriculture, responding to Bina Agarwal’s submission to the Indian Planning Commission on Land Reform, 1989. Agarwal 1997: 3)

Many studies have documented the importance of women’s access to land resources in their own right, and the persistence of gender discrimination in land rights policy and practice (see particularly Agarwal 1994 for South Asia; Deere and de Leal 2001 for Latin America; and
Jacobs 2010: Ch. 8 and Tsikata and Golah 2010: Chs. 4 and 5 for cases from sub-Saharan Africa). The UN’s 1979 Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, now ratified by 187 of the UN’s 193 member states (CEDAW 2012), firmly establishes women’s right to “equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes” (Article 14(g)). But land reforms have themselves often affected women detrimentally.

Moser (1993) pointed out that state-codified, individual forms of land allocation and resettlement often annihilate women’s customary rights to land. “Household”-based models of land reform and resettlement programs, which in practice assign titles not to households but to “household heads,” usually exclude married women as beneficiaries of redistribution, or subsume them under the husband’s title (Jacobs 2010: 43). The same applies to many large-scale contract-farming schemes such as the oil-palm ventures rapidly expanding in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In one Indonesian example, land in customary tenure (in which women had their own rights to land) was first claimed by the state, then allocated to plantation companies and part of it reallocated to contract-farmer households as two-hectare monocrop oil palm plots; although there was no formal gender restriction on who should be the smallholder participant, or what should be the gender of the household head, in practice only the male “Head of Family” is registered as the smallholder (White and White 2011).
Gender relations, thus, are affected centrally by agrarian reform policies, and gendered agency may affect the direction of policies: “land reforms are not democratic unless women achieve rights, autonomy and better life chances within them” (Jacobs 2010: 192).

**Generational issues in land policy**

Much less is known and written about generational issues in land control. The World Bank’s (2006) report on youth, *Development and the Next Generation*, hardly mentions agriculture, even in its chapter on employment, while the Bank’s report *Agriculture for Development* (2007) does not mention youth at all. But several recent studies have highlighted “youth and agriculture” as a new field of problems and future work (for example, IFAD 2010; van der Geest 2010; Leavy and Smith 2010; Chicago Council 2011; Sumberg 2011; Proctor and Lucchesi 2012).

Just as feminist analysis and feminist-informed policy need to be brought to bear on issues of gender and land rights, we need to bring generational analysis and youth-focused policy to bear on the intergenerational tensions that we see almost everywhere in rural communities. In particular we need to understand young people’s problems in getting access to farmland and other agriculture-related opportunities in societies where gerontocracy, agrarian inequality,
and corporate penetration of the agrifood sector, in varying degrees, are the order of the day. In many or most agrarian societies, the older generation—parents, or community elders in places where land is controlled not individually but by customary law—retain control of land as long as possible. The tension between the desires of the older generation to retain control of resources and the desire of young people to receive their share of these resources, form their own independent farms and households, and attain the status of economic and social adulthood is a common feature of many agrarian societies, but surprisingly neglected in research.

Various studies show how access to land is narrowing for young people, and reveal the tensions this generates. Julian Quan, reviewing changes in intra-family land relations in sub-Saharan Africa, notes:

[L]imitations in young people’s access to land, land concentration, and land sales and allocations outside the kin group by older generations can become highly problematic where alternative livelihoods are not available, and can trigger wide social conflicts. (Quan 2007: 57)

It is not surprising if today’s young rural men and women are reluctant to wait for the passing of the older generation (when they may be 40 or 50 years old) to be farmers, and decide to
move to the city, a trend which now extends to all social classes and (in most countries) both genders. The issue of intergenerational transfer of land rights—or, when that does not happen, intergenerational dispossession, when one generation sells off land that ought to be passed on to the next—deserves our attention. If we are interested in small-farm-based alternatives to industrial capitalist agriculture, there needs to be a generation of rural men and women interested in taking up the challenge.

New enclosures? The current debate on corporate land deals

Buy land—they’re not making it any more. (Mark Twain)

There is currently much debate about how to tackle the challenges brought about by corporate “land grabs.” Large-scale, government-supported corporate acquisition of contested lands and common lands, and the accompanying dispossession of local farmers, pastoralists, and forest users is currently occurring on an unprecedented scale in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union, and most particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Several studies have tried to document the location and extent of land deals in recent years (Anseeuw et al. 2012; von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009; Cotula et al. 2009; GRAIN 2008; Oakland Institute 2011; Oxfam 2011; World Bank 2010). With some differences in definition
and the time span covered, recent estimates of the total area of large land deals worldwide range from 43 million hectares (World Bank 2010) to 80 million (Anseeuw et al. 2011) or even 227 million (Oxfam 2011). Among these and other reports there is reasonable consistency that at least 60 percent of total acquisitions are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Lorenzo Cotula’s critical review (2012) of available evidence points to sources of both over- and under-estimation, but confirms that the phenomenon is massive and growing.

These deals are usually accompanied by government and corporate promises to develop modern, industrial forms of agricultural production for export, and to provide good jobs and incomes for local people. But research has long ago shown that these industrial (capital- and energy-intensive) forms of agriculture are unsustainable. They also do not provide employment on any significant scale, tending to create enclaves of capital intensive, monocrop farming with minimal linkages to the local economy.²

There has been a wide range of responses to the current land rush—positive, negative, and neutral. Advocacy of a large farm model for agricultural growth, linked to assumed comparative advantages in a globalized economy, is often at the center of justifications for large-scale corporate land deals (Collier 2008). A “dualistic” agrarian economy is envisaged, with large-scale farms engaged in capitalist production often for export, while smallholder farms gradually disappear or are incorporated as part of contract farming arrangements, with
the former peasantry proletarianized, providing low paid labor to the new estates and plantations. This is the trajectory envisaged in the World Bank’s much-cited (and much criticized) report on *Agriculture for Development* (World Bank 2008). In the increasingly integrated value chains of global agricultural production, it is argued, only large farms or smallholder outgrowers hooked into large agribusiness nuclei can compete, and meet the kinds of standards required for successful export. An agribusiness-oriented vision for agriculture, with large-scale farms at the core, even if linked through outgrower schemes to smallholders, is one that some see as the logical and perhaps inevitable extension of global capital into rural economies: a culmination of processes of agrarian change and capitalist transformation.

These arguments have been taken on by national governments, investors, and donor agencies alike. This has made many policy actors—eager to promote private sector driven investments but on the other hand committed to a discourse of support for smallholder farming—ambivalent about the process of global land grabbing. The World Bank, for example, does not oppose corporate acquisition of land—and indeed facilitates it through its International Finance Corporation—but proposes corporate codes of conduct to ensure “responsible investment in land.” The World Bank group’s Principles for Responsible Agro-Investment, for example, include: respecting land and resource rights; ensuring food security; ensuring transparency, good governance, and a proper enabling environment; consultation and
participation; responsible agro-enterprise investing; social sustainability; and environmental sustainability (World Bank 2010(x): 68–91).

Others are skeptical about the efficacy of codes of conduct (Borras and Franco 2010). The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, is a lone voice within the UN family arguing for a broader vision: not to deny the need for investment in agriculture, but to develop an alternative program for agricultural investment based on reorientation of agricultural systems toward modes of production that are both productive and sustainable.

Land investments implying an important shift in land rights should represent the last and least desirable option, acceptable only if no other investment model can achieve a similar contribution to local development. (De Schutter in UN 2010b: 20, emphasis added; see also De Schutter 2012)

In between these two positions is the initiative around the now-approved FAO-anchored Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security. The complex negotiations for these Voluntary Guidelines have involved key state actors both for and against stronger guidelines, as well as a range of civil society organizations and social movements with differentiated positions on land grabbing. Their implementation will likely become a key arena of political
contestation in coming years between key actors wanting to influence the institutional rules that govern land deals (White et al. 2012).

**Concluding reflections: from security to sovereignty**

A full century of modern land reformism has been accompanied by growing understanding of the politics and social relations of land property. We now know that monopoly control that denies the rural poor access to and control over land is not confined to formal private property rights, but rather cuts across property regimes: elites and corporations control land via private property rights in formal titled systems, and via traditional arrangements in the commons, in state, and public lands. The converse of this is that effective control by the rural poor over land resources does not always have to be through individualized private property rights; it can also be achieved and maintained through communal, community-based, state, and public property arrangements. The essence of redistributive land reform is the shift of power to exercise access to and control over land resources toward the rural poor; but historically and traditionally, land reform has been confined more strictly to redistributing (usually private) lands from monopoly control of landed classes to landless or near-landless classes and groups. Following this conventional framework, land reform remains relevant today, in settings where private land concentration occurs.
Yet, as discussed above, contemporary corporate land grabbing has been targeting lands that do not fall under formal private property systems: state and public lands, and also indigenous peoples’ and community lands that are being claimed by the state. This is the key land issue of the moment. Some kind of redistributive reform is urgent and necessary to prevent people from getting expelled from their land. But land reform—conventionally framed as discussed in this chapter—is unlikely to be the most effective policy and political framework in settings such as these. The call for “land tenure security” (almost always interpreted as promoting individual private property titles) by the World Bank and other mainstream institutions may be well-intentioned, but it does not have the pro-poor and pro-peasant farmer bias of redistributive land reform and is likely to facilitate, not prevent, problematic land deals.

If, as our analysis suggests, there is a need to recast popular demands from land reform or tenure security to something else, then “land sovereignty,” a concept currently being debated by various civil society and rural social movements, is worth considering. It is defined as “the right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape” (Borras and Franco 2012). It is both a call to action against a renewed corporate and (trans)national global push to enclose the commons and an assertion of the need for a people’s enclosure of the land; supporting working peoples and their human right to control
over land. Land sovereignty goes beyond viewing land just as a resource to also considering land as territory and as landscapes. This embraces struggles by indigenous movements, rural laborers, urban activists, and social movements North and South who have sometimes been excluded in traditional land reform campaigns.

Moreover, land sovereignty embraces plural understandings of property rights, encompassing communal, community, state, and/or private rights. It privileges the commons without romanticizing it, and recognizes the importance of state property while confronting the contradictory role of the state in land conflicts. It builds on redistributive land reform, looking to go beyond it by supporting land restitution for people who previously benefited from land reform but have been displaced and dispossessed in more recent land grabs, and by supporting other land policies whose redistributive content can be shaped through mass struggles: e.g., forest land reallocation policies, community-based forest management, tenure reform, and leasehold reform. Finally, it connects with the popular demand and movements for food sovereignty—broadly defined as the rights of people to produce, distribute, and consume safe and healthy food in a sustainable manner—allowing for a mutually reinforcing, synergistic interaction between them.

Land sovereignty thus includes redistributive land reform, land restitution, forest land reallocation, and so on; it aims to clarify the basic principles of what a truly pro-poor land
policy is, and provide a broad and flexible concept that can bring such policies, programs, actions, and endeavors into a singular, common alternative framework.

Therefore, a relevant “redistributive land reform” for the twenty-first century is one that can provide an overarching policy and political framework for public action and political mobilization. It should build on the proactive stance of conventional land reform that calls for ending land monopolies where they exist, but go beyond it to call for pro-active people’s enclosure campaigns where local communities assert their right to have full access to and control over their land resources. A relevant redistributive land reform for the twenty-first century, therefore, is one that is linked—as land reforms were from the 1920s to the 1970s—to broader visions of development.

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2 The classic statement on the link between enclave plantation economy and persistent rural poverty is Beckford (1972).
3 Among many critical views on the World Bank report, see particularly Akram-Lodhi 2008 and Li 2009.
References


