

THE WORLD BANK, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND LAND REFORM
by Robin Palmer, Land Policy Adviser, OXFAM GB, August 2000

Over much of the world civil society is highly critical of the World Bank's involvement in land reform, both past and present. In parts of Latin America it is outrightly hostile. This is hardly surprising, since the Bank has an extremely chequered history on land reform, manifesting a dangerous combination of arrogance and ignorance, coupled with an unwillingness to listen seriously to others or to contemplate redistribution until a decade after the end of the Cold War. *Idées fixes* have proved remarkably difficult to shake, while looking critically at perceived successes has not been a characteristic feature of the Bank's approach.

In South-East Asia, for example, the Thailand land titling reform programme of the 1980s was regarded as such a success that it became the model for Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia and now Cambodia to follow. Yet it has never been subjected to rigorous scrutiny or to much independent evaluation of the effects on poverty of such massive investments in land administration. The countries which have followed the Thailand path, and are now borrowing money to pay for more of the same, have no means of knowing if (or how) land titling benefits the poor. It is as though the promotion of registered titles and land markets are seen as ends in themselves, regardless of the consequences for the poor.

In Africa also land titling was proclaimed for decades as the only true path to development - in order to promote investment and access to credit. Here Kenya was held up as the country to emulate, even though the cracks in the very expensive Kenyan model have long been glaringly apparent, including both failure to achieve agricultural transformation and to end land disputes, while even disadvantaging women. Although it was clearly evident in many other African countries that the recording mechanisms needed to make land titling work on the scale envisaged simply did not exist, still the Bank persisted in pushing it in the early 1990s in Uganda and Tanzania. Even now, although many serious Bank thinkers¹ have long departed from rigid adherence to titling and have come to acknowledge some of the benefits of indigenous African tenure systems, their thinking has all too frequently failed to 'trickle down' to Bank Representatives at the country level, where Kenyan-model plans are still peddled as though nothing has changed, such as recently in Rwanda.

As for the 'new' and much-hyped model of 'market-assisted' land reforms, which involve governments taking a more hands-off approach, they have conspicuously failed to address either political realities or power relations on the ground. In Brazil they have done nothing to break the power of the large landlords, while in post-apartheid South Africa their scope for securing sustainable rural livelihoods for poor people has proved to be extremely limited.

Reality has failed to match rhetoric at other levels as well. A desire for greater inter-donor cooperation on land reform, while appearing to offer engagement in serious dialogue, is seen by some as merely a cynical ploy to retain Washington's dominance. As for its proclaimed desire to work more fully with civil society, this has often in practice meant the Bank trying to dominate and control civil society actors while deploying the discourse of 'empowerment'. So, although there have been some modest signs of improvement in recent years, the civil

¹ John W. Bruce and Shem E. Migot-Adholla (Eds.), *Searching for Land Tenure Security in Africa* (Kendall/Hunt, Dubuque, Iowa, 1994).

society jury remains rightly critical, hostile and suspicious of the Bank's motives for supporting land reform. It demands a much more listening and responsive Bank.²

² Some of these concerns are raised on the Oxfam land rights website, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights>