

Land and agrarian reform in the 21st century: changing realities, changing arguments?

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Keynote address
Global Assembly of Members, International Land Coalition
Entebbe, Uganda, 24-27 April 2007

Mike Davis's recent book¹, *Planet of Slums*, paints a vivid picture of a rapidly urbanizing global society where hundreds of thousands of people leave rural areas each week in search of a promised land of jobs, houses and consumer goods. Most urban immigrants, however, find themselves living in vast, sprawling slums. Many do not find jobs, and eke out a bare living within an informal economy, now estimated to comprise around 1 billion people globally. Davis characterizes this informal economy as a 'sink for surplus labour which can only keep pace with subsistence by ever more heroic feats of self-exploitation and the further competitive subdivision of already densely filled survival niches' (Davis 2004: 27). A very different picture from Hernando de Soto's vision of a dynamic informal economy filled with millions of micro-entrepreneurs, held back from entry to the miracle-world of capitalism only by the refusal of their governments to properly register and 'formalise' their property rights! And, in my view, a more accurate, if disturbing, one.

Part of the reason for this mass flight from the countryside of the Third World is the failure of most rural development policies of the past few decades, whether these were couched in terms of 'community development', 'modernisation' of peasant agriculture or structural adjustment. While rural poverty has remained intractable in many places, contemporary globalization has seen the emergence of increasingly tightly integrated global agro-food commodity chains under the control of large agri-business corporations, which oversee the production, processing and distribution of crop and livestock products in international markets, as well as the supply of inputs to 'high tech' forms of farming. National governments are increasingly eager to attract investment by these corporations, and often bend over backwards to make land available to them, sometimes for agricultural production itself – as we see happening in Uganda today.

Some rural producers are managing to secure a niche for themselves in global commodity chains by meeting exacting export market requirements; they are often located on larger plots of land and employ non-family labour. At the same time liberalized markets have seen low-priced imports flooding into domestic markets, creating further problems for many farmers. In this 'brave new world' many rural households can no longer rely on agriculture alone, and are being forced to diversify their livelihood within the local economy, or to seek non-rural sources of income. As Deborah Bryceson has pointed out, large-scale 'de-agrarianization' of rural economies as a result of structural adjustment policies helps to explain livelihood diversification and urban drift. Another consequence has been the emergence of new forms of social differentiation within the ranks of 'peasants' and 'the rural poor', that build on the inherent tendency of small-scale rural producers to separate out into antagonistic classes of capital and labour, but articulate with gender, ethnic, religious and other identities in complex ways

¹ Verso, 2006, which is based on his 2004 article in *New Left Review*.

In the light of these changing realities, we need to ask: what convincing rationales exist for land reform in the 21st century, and in particular, for land policies and programmes that have *poverty reduction* as their key objective? It seems increasingly inadequate to simply re-assert that in many third world countries rural poverty remains widespread and is strongly associated with inequality in land holding, or to just take it for granted that poor people have a right to land and resources for their own sustenance. Simplistic assumptions that secure rights to good quality land, held either individually or collectively, together with access to credit, inputs and markets and policies that favour small-scale producers, will be sufficient to ensure adequate livelihoods for the majority of rural producers, can be questioned, in the light of the realities sketched above.

It is also insufficient to add ‘socio-political imperatives’ for land reform such as defusing the potential for violent conflict, assisting with post-conflict reconstruction, promoting the rights and social status of indigenous groups and women, redressing historic injustices, or promoting environmentally sustainable land use (Borras *et al* 2007). These undoubtedly reflect the strong association between land and political dynamics in many contemporary contexts, and growing awareness of the centrally important question of ecological sustainability – but do these considerations contribute much to convincing rationales for *poverty reducing* land reform, in the harsh world of an integrating global economy under the sway of capital? On the other hand, it is true that a variety of popular struggles over land continue to be waged in many parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia, as rural people actively resist being dumped on the rubbish heap of history, and that issues of identity and unequal power relations are often integral to such struggles.

In my view the realities of a changing and urbanizing world require us to reconsider the economic justifications for land reform, and to think through what this means for a pro-poor land agenda in struggles, advocacy and policies. As before, thinking through the connections between land and agricultural livelihoods, as well as other forms of income (such as natural resource harvesting and processing, eco-tourism) will be crucial, if coherent arguments for a broader programme of agrarian reform are to be mounted. In a recent attempt, Akram-Lodhi and colleagues (2007: 391) argue that land policies must ‘reform land-based social relationships in a multidimensional manner’. This must include addressing the ‘economically inefficient’ nature of prevailing property rights regimes, and ensuring that reforms are ‘productivity-enhancing’ and firmly embedded within ‘the broader structure and goals of strategies for capital accumulation and national development, poverty elimination and social transformation’ (ibid).

But these kinds of arguments also run into difficulties these days. Many are sceptical, given the dynamics of global change. One example is Rigg (2006), who suggests that a large proportion of the rural population in the South can never become ‘rural entrepreneurs’ because they lack the basic assets and resources which are required. In his view policy makers should see ‘rural futures as differentiated and complex ... sustainable livelihoods ... are increasingly likely to be divorced, spatially and occupationally, from the land’ (ibid: 196, and see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Rural poverty and rural production (from Rigg 2006)

Question	Old answer	New answer	Broken links
Best way to assist rural poor?	Redistribute land Invest in agriculture	Re-skill the poor (investing in agriculture is inequality widening)	Poverty and inequality have become de-linked from activity and occupation
How to build sustainable future in	Support small-holder farming	Support people’s efforts to leave	Association of pro-poor policies with

rural South?		farming, permitting the amalgamation of land holdings and emergence of agrarian entrepreneurs	small-holder farming has been broken
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Reinvigorated and more persuasive arguments are required in favour of ‘pro-poor’ land reform, if the skeptics are to be convinced. In the past a variety of economic arguments were articulated, but remember that most land reform to date has been of the ‘land to the tiller’ kind, involving the confiscation of land owned by landlords with their social origin in pre-capitalist social structures, and the ‘Agrarian Question’ was originally framed in terms of the role of land and agriculture in the transition to industrialised forms of capitalism. In the view of some analysts, the Agrarian Question of *capital*, on a ‘world-historical scale’, has now been resolved (Bernstein 2006). Is there a new agrarian question, perhaps of ‘classes of labour’, arising from the conditions of the 21st century (ibid: 453)? If there is, then this might require the re-framing of the rationales for land reform.

Older perspectives and approaches may still have some relevance, however. In Table 2 below I distinguish between six main types of economic rationale for land reform, drawn from three influential schools of thought, each of the six being also associated with particular political ideologies or stances. (Not considered in this table are traditions that downplay economic arguments for land reform in favour of other goals such as justice, historical redress or socio-political rights)

What I would like to suggest is that proponents of ‘pro-poor land reform’ such as the ILC and its affiliates should carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses of these kinds of arguments, in the light of the specific and often highly variable conditions found in different contexts. Some of these older perspectives may still be useful, others may not; new arguments may need to be developed. Given rapid urbanization and the growth of slum dwelling, it will be important to apply these arguments to peri-urban and urban areas as well as rural, and to examine the new forms of relationship between these once so distinct but increasingly blurred forms of habitation and livelihood.

What does the typology in Table 2 suggest might be the key issues to focus on in such an attempt to reformulate the rationale for pro-poor land reform? One can take something useful from each of the six traditions listed. For example:

1. From the neo-liberal school one might take on board a concern with productive efficiency and think about policies that will promote the optimal use of scarce land, labour and capital (but without necessarily accepting its ideological emphasis on ‘market forces’ as the main driver of processes of wealth creation).
2. From the neo-populist tradition one might accept that scale of production is an important issue to address, and that a key focus should be factors (including policies) that influence the efficiency of a variety of forms and scales of production (but without necessarily accepting its founding premise of an ‘inverse relationship’ between scale and efficiency).
3. From a livelihoods-oriented ‘developmentalism’ one might take a focus on the multiple livelihood sources of poor people, to help avoid a narrow and blinkered focus on farming alone,

as well as some policy emphases such as ‘territorial’ or area-based development’ planning (but without necessarily accepting the its profoundly apolitical stance).

4. From a welfarist approach to land reform one might take a key concern with household food security (but without necessarily accepting that this should be the sole purpose of land reform).

5. From the radical populist tradition one might take on board a central concern with the need to reconfigure agrarian structure (at both the national and international scale) ie. the distribution of productive enterprises and associated property rights, and their performance in terms of output and net income (without necessarily accepting its tendency to emphasize the unitary interests of ‘peasants’ or ‘the rural poor’ and insufficiently acknowledge tensions between emerging class and gendered interests).

6. From the Marxist tradition one might take a central concern with evaluating the economics of land reform in terms of a wider concept of social efficiency that includes consideration of exploitation, as well as a focus on the class and gender relations that underpin the organization of production and of agrarian structure (without necessarily accepting the idealization of large scale agriculture in some strands of the tradition, or the economic reductionism of some forms of Marxism).

While there is something to be taken from each of these schools of thought, eclecticism has its limits, and choices have to be made when it comes to politics and policies. I locate myself, for example, within the Marxist tradition, am skeptical that ‘market-assisted’ approaches to land reform have much to offer, and think that recent attempts to theorize an Agrarian Question of ‘classes of labour’ are cogent and speak to contemporary realities more powerfully than other approaches. What this might mean in terms of policy advocacy, however, is not yet clear.

Conclusion

Proponents of land reform are often concerned not only with issues of land and agriculture in relation to issues of national economic growth and development, poverty reduction and food security, but also in relation to questions of social justice and redressing historical legacies of dispossession and/or exploitation (the ‘land question’). These remain important. In this address, however, I have offered the view that the economic bases of ‘pro-poor land reform’ need reformulating in the rapidly conditions of the contemporary world. Large urban populations need to be fed and technologically sophisticated forms of farming need to be put at the service of productive regimes that sustain these populations, while questions of the ecological viability of current technologies loom ever larger. Issues of the unequal structure of international agricultural trade regimes need to be considered and made integral to thinking about agrarian reform.

At the same time, capitalism in most parts of the South seems incapable of providing secure livelihoods for the majority of the population. As Mike Davis puts it (2004: 27),

The labour-power of a billion people has been expelled from the world system, and who can imagine any plausible scenario, under neo-liberal auspices, that would re-integrate them as productive workers or mass consumers?

The challenge for proponents of land and agrarian reform is to ‘imagine’, think hard about, and work for plausible alternative scenarios for sustainable and sustaining rural and urban economies. There are important lessons from past formulations and experiences, but in many ways this is uncharted territory.

References

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Table 2. Arguments for land reform

	Neo-classical economics		Sustainable livelihoods		Marxism and radical political economy	
Politics/ ideology	Neo-liberalism	Neo-populism	Developmentalism	Welfarism	Radical populism	Class struggle
Central focus	Well-functioning markets vs market distortions and 'imperfections'	Linking equity and productivity	Development = poverty reduction	Poverty alleviation	Inequality in land holdings as a cause of rural poverty; unequal power relations	Agrarian question in transitions to capitalism; new agrarian questions of 'classes of labour'
Policies advocated	Market-led LR: reduce market imperfections; register private property rights; provide credit to promote investment	Market-assisted LR: reduce policy biases favouring large farms or urban consumers; promote efficient markets; secure property rights; credit; land taxes	State action to support smallholder production eg land reform, targeted subsidies, co-ordination of marketing; LR as part of territorial development.	Enhanced access to land for small-scale food production as a safety net	Radical, pro-poor agrarian reform, either state- or beneficiary-led; must be productivity enhancing, with complementary agricultural and dev. policies	2 views: collectivization of efficient large capitalist farms (or: improve conditions of labour) vs support for struggles for land of agrarian classes of labour
Beneficiaries	Efficient farmers at any scale; (often economies of scale apply and larger farms seen as socially efficient)	Efficient small farmers who maximize returns to land	The rural poor with multiple livelihoods; small farmers	The rural poor and unemployed with limited access to jobs or alternative incomes	Peasants (small family farmers) and farm workers, the rural poor	Fragmented classes of labour: agric workers, petty commodity producers, semi-proletarians
Useful questions	How efficient is production on redistributed land? Returns to land, labour, capital?	What factors & conditions influence the efficiency of different scales of production?	What are the multiple sources of livelihood for LR beneficiaries?	What difference does food production make to household welfare of LR beneficiaries?	How has LR impacted on agrarian structure (sub-regional and national)?	What dynamics of class & gender differentiation occur within LR?