

**REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
AGRARIAN REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT (ICARRD)
Tagaytay City, Philippines, 5-8 December 2000**

by
Robin Palmer
Land Policy Adviser
Oxfam GB
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This is a short and necessarily personal report on a large international conference on agrarian reform and rural development (ICARRD) which I intended through a series of chance events, and at which (at the last minute) I was asked to give a short paper.

The conference brought together a diverse range of people from many countries and continents, including representatives from governments, local and international NGOs, popular movements, peasant associations, academics, donors, the World Bank, FAO, the Wisconsin Land Tenure Center etc. There was a large turn out from the Department (= Ministry) of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in the Philippines.

In my view, this diversity worked extremely well; there was good interaction, especially in the smaller group sessions, and most of the academics who gave presentations managed to remember that they were in a minority in the audience!

A range of papers on agrarian reform (or its lack) were presented, notably from Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Mexico, Brazil, Latin America as a whole, the former Soviet Union, South Africa and Zimbabwe. There were also general presentations on market based land reform, 'civil society', and a range of other topics.

We were reminded that we were not engaged in a mere academic exercise by the presence of competing (pro- and anti-government) ranks of peasant groups trying to make their presence felt near the conference centre on the first day. The armed police allowed the pro group¹ to approach, but the others were held at bay. Both were however able to circulate their messages to delegates. This was a tangible reminder of both the strength of and the divisions within the popular movement in the Philippines, reflecting its complex historical involvement in agrarian reform over many years.² Some of the 'anti' groups had held their own meeting before the conference³ and decided to boycott it.⁴ There were also a number of rumours

¹ UNORKA (National Coordination of Local Autonomous Rural People's Organizations), *Statement on the Occasion of ICARRD, 5-8 December 2000*.

² This is fully documented in a book by one of the conference presenters: Saturnino M. Borras Jr., *The Bitingka Strategy in Land Reform Implementation: Autonomous Peasant Movements and State Reformists in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1999).

³ *Peasants' Continuing Struggle for Genuine Agrarian Reform: A National Conference on the State of Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, 3-5 December 2000*.

⁴ I met one of them later, with Oxfam colleagues. He was Marvic Leonen, Executive Director of the LRC-KSK (Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center - Kasama sa Kalikasan), which is much involved in the issue of indigenous peoples' land rights.

about the ‘real’ purpose of the conference; one was that the whole thing was a screen for the DAR and the World Bank to announce a ‘new’ market-based land reform programme for the Philippines. (The funding for ICARRD had come from EZE, FAO, GTZ, ICCO, and the World Bank). I preferred to believe the official line that it was essentially about reasserting the importance and centrality of agrarian reform in poverty reduction and rural development.⁵

A number of issues came through the presentations and discussions very clearly.

1. There was almost unanimous rejection of **market-based land reform**. Delegate after delegate spoke of its inadequacies and failures in many parts of the world - essentially because it was blind both to politics and to power relations on the land. Due to the wide interest in the topic, the organisers moved what had been scheduled as an optional workshop session on agrarian reform and markets into a plenary. This involved a splendid, even dramatic, confrontation between Klaus Deininger of the World Bank and Jeffrey Riedinger of Michigan State University.⁶ In the opinion of most, Riedinger won the contest hands down. As the ICARRD final statement put it:

During the course of our deliberations, a vibrant debate emerged over the model of ‘market based reform’ promoted by the World Bank in recent years. Many participants welcomed the fact that agrarian reform has been put back on the agenda of the Bank. Further, there was significant agreement that reform can only achieve its goals when rural producers and communities are organised to demand and participate in its implementation. **However, a majority of participants endorsed the idea that by definition agrarian reform must involve state regulation to overcome the failure of markets to deliver equitable, just and productive outcomes in agriculture and rural development.** The logic of agrarian reform is to bring together state action with the action of rural producers and communities to ensure that those who have previously been excluded from the benefits of growth and development can operate effectively within markets and secure livelihoods and opportunities for improvement.

⁵ Officially, the objectives were described as:

To bring together international and national scholars, policy makers, civil society groups/ social movements and mobilize interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral support for agrarian reform;

To identify strategic options and ‘next steps’;

To influence agrarian reform and rural development policies at the national and international levels; and,

To redefine/ re-invent agrarian reform in the context of globalization and the open economy.

⁶ Riedinger’s excellent paper (which I have circulated) was entitled *Market-Based Land Reform: An Imperfect Solution*. Among the key topics addressed in his paper were:

A market-based approach to agrarian reform will redistribute little land and benefit few landless families.

A market-based approach to land reform is likely to be unaffordable to the would-be beneficiaries because the ‘market’ value of land exceeds the agronomic value of the land.

If implemented, large-scale market-based agrarian reform will drive up land prices, effectively excluding poor farmers from the benefits of reform.

Would-be beneficiaries of market-based agrarian reform lack access to affordable private credit markets to finance their share of the land cost.

The empirical record of market-based reforms offers little evidence that this approach will result in rapid or significant redistribution of land.

Uncertainty in the agricultural sector can best be addressed by a clear commitment to rapid completion of conventional - compulsory acquisition-based - agrarian reform.

This consciously or unconsciously echoed the views of UNORKA (the National Coordination of Local Autonomous Rural People's Organizations), which is strongly urging the Philippines Government to implement its Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) and the DAR to re-ignite the 'reformist fire from above':

We reject the World Bank's market-assisted land reform. We reject such market-based scheme because its core principles directly contradict the essence of truly redistributive agrarian reform. It is oblivious of the country's history on land monopoly. It is blind to the elite-controlled political economy... we believe that the state has the responsibility to safeguard the rural poor from the harshness of the market. Market forces cannot redistribute land assets. Landlords will not take initiatives to kill their own class.⁷

2. Very closely related to this was the recognition of the need for strong states and the crucial importance of **the role of the state in agrarian reform**. This was echoed in paper after paper,⁸ in discussions, and in the final statement, part of which read:

The shared experience of reform among participants in the conference led to a wide consensus over the need for strong and effective state action ensured through active involvement of peoples organisations.

John Harriss of the LSE noted how the espousal by the World Bank and other donors of something very loosely and carelessly defined as 'civil society' as an essential actor in agrarian reform was often put forward as a means of deliberately depoliticising the issues.⁹ Harriss asked me, after my presentation on *Recent Experiences of Civil Society Participation in Land Policy Planning in Rwanda and Malawi*,¹⁰ what role political parties had played in those countries. The answer was none (and perhaps appropriately so in the case of formulating national land policies) - but it led me to reflect how little political parties in Africa (within newly multi-party systems) had been involved in current land struggles. An

⁷ UNORKA, *Statement on the Occasion of ICARRD, 5-8 December 2000*.

⁸ Part of the keynote presentation read: 'It is now clear that governments will have to take a more active role if agrarian reform is not to come to a complete halt.' W.C. Thiesenhusen, *Poverty amidst Plenty*. In a paper on India, it was stated: 'Solving the land question - ending the extreme concentration of land ownership and use in the countryside - is still central to solving the agrarian question in India. Historical experience has shown that land reform in this sense can be achieved only through non-market intervention. One of the greatest failures of state power in India was its failure - and historic inability to seize the opportunity afforded by Independence and the mobilisation of the people in the freedom struggle to deal with the land question head on and reverse the class order in the countryside. Kerala and West Bengal are the two major exceptions to the all-India experience in this regard.' V.K. Ramachandran, *Agrarian Reforms and Rural Development Policies in India: a Note*.

⁹ 'That civil society exists in a field of power - or that there are differences of power within civil society - hardly seems to cross the minds of those who would wish to see the space of civil society expanded, and that of the state reduced. I think that both 'social capital' and 'civil society' have proven so attractive in the discourse of development because they seem to hold out the prospects of democracy without the inconveniences of contestational politics and the conflicts of ideas and interests which are an essential part of democracy.' John Harriss, *Social Capital Construction and the Consolidation of Civil Society in Rural Areas*.

¹⁰ Available on the Oxfam *Land Rights in Africa* website:
<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights/>

exception is Zimbabwe, but events there are (perhaps) exceptional.¹¹ After the conference, an Oxfam colleague noted the apparent contrast between an extremely vibrant civil society in the Philippines, but its lack of impact on anti-poverty measures, and Vietnam, with a totally un-vibrant civil society, but significant impact on anti-poverty measures via pressures from international NGOs.

3. Another issue which surfaced in some of the papers was **the role of the Cold War in promoting agrarian reform**. Specifically that fears of the spread of Communism after the Second World War led to very strong American pressures for land reform in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, and this was repeated in much of Latin America after the Cuban Revolution through the American-led Alliance for Progress. People wondered whether similar initiatives were possible in a globalised, post-Cold War world. The paper on the former Soviet Union gave a chastening reminder of the failure of the extremely naïve and optimistic World Bank policy blueprints of the early 1990s, which attempted to draw comparisons with earlier experiences from China and Vietnam.¹²

4. One theme which was brought home to me powerfully in Jun Borrás' paper on the Philippines, but even more so during the following week when I was able to take a brief look at Oxfam support for the rights of indigenous peoples (and fisherfolk) was **the dominant and deeply entrenched power of the Filipino landlords**. Borrás writes that 'the intensity of landlord resistance to reform has been especially escalating, expressed through various legal and illegal tactics of intimidation and coercion.'¹³ It struck me that it is (and will be) far more straightforward to confront and dislodge the power of white farmers in Southern Africa than (in Borrás' words) that of the 'local political bosses (*caciques*) who lord it over the countryside through a complex network of patronage.'

Whatever the complexity of the local politics (which I do not pretend to begin to understand, but which was certainly enlivened by the impeachment of the President, broadcast live on TV and radio), the conference was, in my judgement, a great success in reaffirming the validity of and the strong need for agrarian reform. In addition, it was a most agreeable event, marked by excellent organisation, extremely solicitous hosts, great evening social events, and sensational singing and dancing at the start and end of the conference. It will live long in the memory.¹⁴

¹¹ Both the Zimbabwean Minister of Lands, Joseph Made, and his Permanent Secretary, Vincent Hungwe, attended ICARRD. In a very effective presentation, Hungwe made a spirited defence of his government's fast track land reform and resettlement programme.

¹² Max Spoor and Oane Visser, *The State of Agrarian Reform in the Former Soviet Union*.

¹³ Saturnino M. Borrás Jr, *The Philippine Agrarian Reform: Relatively Vibrant Land Redistribution amidst less-than-dynamic Agricultural Transformation*.

¹⁴ A number of concrete plans and suggestions were made towards the end of the conference and will doubtless be written up in due course. Beforehand, ICARRD hoped that among the expected outputs would be:
Comparative assessment of accomplishments and impact of agrarian reform;
Definition of strategic options and next steps;
Identification of gaps in existing policies and modes of implementation;
Identification of avenues for foreign donor support;
Information and Education materials: ICARRD Book and website;
Road map of post-conference activities.