

THOUGHTS ON THE LATEST (March 2003) WORLD BANK LAND PRR

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[Note: this was a presentation made verbally, and then circulated to a plenary session at a meeting at the World Bank in Washington to review the Bank's Policy Research Report on land, now renamed *Land Policy for Growth and Poverty Reduction*. Other papers presented at that meeting are now available at <http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/essdext.nsf/24ByDocName/PRRReviewMeeting>]

One of the hardest things in life, I believe, is to acknowledge that you really got it wrong, that you made mistakes, that some of your success stories were not all that successful after all, and that some of your research and information might perhaps, on reflection, have been just a little flawed. I speak here not of course of George W, but of the World Bank's Land Policy Division!

In 1965, shortly after Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence, I was deported from Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe) because I was researching a doctoral thesis on the highly sensitive subject of the politics of land in that country. Robert Mugabe has reminded us forcefully in recent years of just how emotive and explosive that topic can be and has drawn our urgent attention to the unfinished business of redistribution in Southern Africa, a subject I raised in the recent email discussion of the PRR, which is tabled today.

I am not at all sure whether Klaus Deininger would find it more politically comfortable to receive a ringing endorsement or a stinging rebuke from me for his Policy Research Report (PRR) on land. An outsider can never quite fathom the labyrinthine internal politics in such matters. I suspect it might perhaps be the latter, in which case I can reveal that an erstwhile Oxfam colleague dismissed the new PRR as 'just the usual Washington consensus with a dash of Amartya Sen.'

I do not however share this somewhat uncharitable view. As many of you will know, the fact that I am here at all, that I attended the regional workshops in Africa and Asia last year, that I wrote a summary and guide to the PRR to help those unlikely to find time to read its entire 150 pages,¹ and that I helped to moderate the recent email discussion on it, mean that I believe there is some mileage in this process for me, and for the people with whom I now work most closely, still on the politics of land.

They are mostly NGO land alliances and coalitions in Africa, where, as we all know, civil society is relatively weak in comparison to much of the rest of the world. Since serious political struggle over land (which has been a key element in parts of Latin America and South-East Asia) is largely not yet an option here,² Oxfam GB (for whom I work as Land Policy Adviser) seeks to engage in

¹ <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights/downloads/guideprtrtf>

² South Africa, with its long history of political organisation and struggle, and which has witnessed the emergence of a Landless Peoples' Movement recently, may be an exception.

positive dialogue with governments, civil society and donors to promote pro-poor land policies in Africa, where of course the World Bank is often a key and highly controversial player, as Joe Hanlon has nicely illustrated in his report on the land debate in Mozambique.³

So my position is quite simply that I want a land PRR from the Bank which is both honest and open enough to admit past mistakes and misguided dogma, and is as genuinely pro-poor as possible. Obviously I do this in the (probably naive) hope that a more enlightened PRR will in future influence both Bank policy and practice at the absolutely critical national level and will lead to more effective and far less contentious donor relations at that level.

I need to state publicly that for many of my colleagues and Oxfam partners, such close collaboration with the Bank is highly problematic, and in some countries would be deemed quite inappropriate on account of much extremely negative past historical experience. I am thinking here of countries such as Indonesia and parts of Central and South America. The Bank would do well to remember that very many people across the world unambiguously see it as ‘the enemy’, as being totally dogmatic in its approaches (for example over market assisted land reform), as being unwilling to listen, and as being fundamentally antagonistic to the needs and interests of the poor. It would be well for Bank officials to reflect on this fact, and to seek positive ways of redressing it.

People like myself, a mere historian by training, are often dismissed as populists, or purveyors of interesting but ultimately unimportant and irrelevant anecdotes, and we are expected to bow before the collective wisdom of Stalinist macroeconomists, high on their post-Cold War triumphalism. So, when coming to Washington, I decided to arm myself with the latest edition of the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, a special issue (Vol.3, Nos 1 &2) devoted to ‘Agrarian Change, Gender and Land Rights’, in order to arm myself with some academic weight. In the article by Ann Whitehead and Dzodzi Tsikata, the argument essentially is that there are many conflicting policy signals currently coming out of the Bank - on land policy, on gender, on forests (one thinks of the current controversies in Cambodia), on water, the environment, and so on. Just as we all glibly advise governments in Africa and elsewhere to make their laws and policies on land and related issues mutually compatible, that advice is clearly also something which the Bank needs to take very seriously to heart. As Whitehead and Tsikata argue:

The World Bank is a large and complex organization and, despite heavy orchestration to produce a strong orthodoxy in its analyses, its many separate divisions have different kinds of policy focus and make a range of thematic arguments, no more so than with respect to land and gender issues, where the Bank’s separate sections have very different levels of expertise.

As statements about the policy approach taken to land reform in particular African states, however, these documents from the LPD have to be treated with caution. The policy drivers in the constituent parts of the World Bank are by no means the same. *The nuanced, self-critical and empirically foregrounded approaches of the Land Policy Division, with a new stress on the evolution of local-level practices* [my emphasis added] are not necessarily shared elsewhere. One competing set of discourses comes out of the Bank’s divisions working on the environment and sustainability where there is a long-held view that communal forms of

³ Joseph Hanlon, The land debate in Mozambique: will foreign investors, the urban elite, advanced peasants or family farmers drive rural development?, Report for Oxfam GB in Southern Africa, June 2002, available at <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights/downloads/debatmoz.pdf>

property ownership lead to over-exploitation. Cleaver and others take a very strong line on the need for individual land rights to prevent land degradation. Many macro-economists also support this position, although for rather different reasons. A free-market philosophy and an agenda of economic growth through further market liberalization, even when accompanied by poverty-reduction objectives, are responsible for the almost routine way in which reform to individual land titling appears in many country-level documents (for example, in its Country Assistance Strategies, which are largely written from a macroeconomic perspective.) The World Bank continues to offer substantial support to governments establishing land tenure reform with individual registered titles.⁴

I would want to (almost) conclude by generally welcoming this nuanced and self-critical approach in the land PRR, and to hope that that approach gains ground among other policy drivers in the Bank. It is something which we, on the civil society side, so to speak, can relate to. I have already stated my generally positive views on the PRR in my brief guide and comment posted on the websites of the Bank's Land Policy Division and of Oxfam GB's Land Rights in Africa site

(<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/learning/landrights/index.html>)

which seeks to document a range of land conflicts across the continent from a pro-poor perspective. I continue to have a range of specific criticisms of the latest rough cut version (which I read at 30,000 feet above the Atlantic) and hope to be able to voice some of these either in the discussions here or separately in writing, but - for all the very genuine and serious differences of opinion at times - I would endorse the enthusiasm of many at the regional workshops (flawed though some of them clearly were) that at least and at last some within the

Bank are now treating land issues with the seriousness they deserve, that there is beginning to be more slightly more common ground, that they have listened to some of the criticisms of their past policies, and are now grappling, with many other actors, with the nuances and complexities of 'land policy for pro-poor development'.

One needs to conclude however, on the very much more sober note that all the pro-poor land reform, laws and policies in the world will be of very limited value for as long as international trade rules and subsidies remain rigged in favour of the rich. This is why Oxfam and many others are campaigning to make trade fair (www.MakeTradeFair.com) or, more poetically in Spanish, to seek *comercio con justicia*.

⁴ Ann Whitehead and Dzodzi Tsikata, 'Policy Discourses on Women's Land Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Implications of the Re-turn to the Customary', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3, 1 & 2, 2003, 67-112. (here are cited pp.80, 83).