

# Redistributive Land reform and the rural poor: a critique and contribution from the Philippines

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Current presentation mainly based on:

- (a) Borras (2006). 'The Philippine Land reform in comparative perspective...', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, vol 6, no. 1.
- (b) S. Borras and Terry McKinley (2006). 'The Unresolved Land Reform debate...', *IPC Policy Brief No. 2*. International Poverty Centre (IPC)/UNDP.

WB claims 'pro-poor' land policies; de Soto claims 'pro-poor land policies', critics cry for 'pro-poor land policies'.

How do we actually make clear demarcation between the different meanings?

This brings us to a fundamental issue:

“bringing ‘social relationships’ back in” – that property rights are about relations between people, that land reform is about reforming such relationships. Thus, it is inherently a ‘governance’ issue. Hence, despite enormous diversity between settings, general principles of ‘pro-poor land reform/policy’ can be, must be, established.

The notion of 'governance' around 'pro-poor land reform' policies entails:

- a) assumption of pre-existing distribution of land-based wealth and power in society that needs to be reformed,
- b) entails 'state power' to enforce and make authoritative in society reform rules/laws (laws are not self-interpreting/not self-implementing), and
- c) requires careful tracing of the actual flow of the transfer over such wealth and power – from the landed elite to the poor.
- d) But that land is understood as having multidimensional function (econ, pol. Social, cultural, geography...)

In short, it is not about 'things'; it is about 'social relationships' between groups/classes of people, between state and societal groups.

Conditions vary from one setting to the next, but these broad principles can be a useful analytic sign posts.

## Flow of presentation

- (1) Brief review of the notion of redistributive land reform & the rural poor. (definition, social relationships)
- (2) strengths & weaknesses of conventional wisdom, involving: a) private lands, b) 'public' [inclg: 'state', 'communal' lands, etc. = 'non-private' lands] lands, and c) share tenancy/leasehold reform = with empirical insights from the Philippines
- (3) Implications for current/future thinking about redistributive land reform and the rural poor, in the Philippines and elsewhere

## Part 1: the notion of redistributive reform

- (i) The assumptions re: 'inefficiency' of large farms amid mass unemployed rural poor (econ.), 'historical injustice' (politics), social exclusion/social inequality (social), and so on. LR has always been conceived as having multiple & interlinked dimensions.
- (ii) Property rights as relationship between people (and not a technical thing). And so, LR is about reforming relationships between people.

- (iii) Conventional wisdom: in general, land reform is thought of redistributing private large farms to poor peasants in order to create small family farms (Griffin et al)
- (iv) Conventional wisdom emphasizes the 'cross-classes' net transfer of wealth and power: from the private large farms to landless peasants. That is what is meant by 'reform'; it is not just about 'change'. Change can be 'within class' (elite-to-elite) transfers. Reform has underlying notion of 'value judgment', a bias, a pro-poor bias.
- (v) Critical to hold on the basic tenets of conventional wisdom about: a) LR as reforming social relationships, b) focusing on the net transfer of wealth and power from the elite to subaltern social classes or groups of people, and c) and a conception of land property and so LR as having multiple, interlinked dimensions (econ, pol., soc., cultural, etc)

## Part 2: Problems with the conventional wisdom

Conventional wisdom on LR excluded in its analysis and so practice significant portion of the actually existing agrarian structure and transactions between groups of people therein:

- (i) A priori excluded actually existing production relations that occur in lands that are officially classified as 'public' [or 'state', or 'communal' = or the 'non-private' lands].
- (ii) Has inconsistently included – or excluded – real redistributive land reform achieved via share tenancy or leasehold reform
- (iii) Has inadvertently included land transfers involving private lands that do not actually constitute real redistributive land reform.

- (i) A priori excluded actually existing production relations that occur in lands that are officially classified as 'public' [or 'state', or 'communal' = or the 'non-private' lands].

LR scholarship rejects the notion of LR in public lands, calls it 'counter-reform' etc. (see classic works, e.g. El-Ghonemy, de Janvry, etc.) Some degree of validity, but in general flawed framework. Many lands in 'non-private' legal category are in fact under the effective control of private elites (landlords, logging concessions, mining concessions, etc. Examples from the Philippines (Indonesia, Bolivia, etc.). Lands under private control but whose legal category remains in the 'grey area' (what Jin Sato, 2000, calls 'ambiguous lands' in the context of Thailand).

Taking them out of the realm of LR risks missing the actually existing exploitative relationships and fall into the 'technical oriented trap' of treating the problem in these lands as 'legal-technical' (ie needing only 'formalization of land rights' (and so land titling)... It can be, and on many occasions has been, 'anti-poor' (formalizing the claims by non-poor claimants).

- (ii) Has inconsistently included – or excluded – real redistributive land reform achieved via share tenancy or leasehold reform

Conventional wisdom is fixated on rights transfers that involve the bundle of rights, esp. the right to alienate. It considers as non-real redistributive reform share tenancy/leasehold reforms (eg. Lipton's works).

Some degree of validity, esp when share tenancy/lease reforms are carried out *instead* of or as *substitute* to LR.

But flawed in context where it has been carried out and to be carried out as complementary policy to LR, e.g. Philippines/SA (or if the given condition requires mainly such a kind of reform, e.g. West Bengal)

Implications of neglect: unable to critically relate to the current arguments of some economists pushing for 'share tenancy' formalization as an 'economic ladder' for the rural poor (e.g. Banerjee, de Janvry, Sadoulet)

- (i) Has inadvertently included land transfers involving private lands that do not actually constitute real redistributive land reform.

Uncritical acceptance of all officially claimed redistribution involving private lands as real LR, including faked transfers, elite-to-elite transfers, simple 'real estate' transactions such as those via the so-called 'willing buyer-willing seller' schemes.

In many of these schemes there are no real net transfer of wealth and power from the landed elite to the landless or nearlandless rural poor.

There might be some changes in the agrarian structure, but these are not explicitly pro-poor reforms.

Plus: in some cases LR (even in conventional frameworks) could be, and has been, anti-poor/anti-women (institutionalizing historical injustice): land redistribution to current dominant claimants instead of 'restitution' to correct historical injustice, etc.

## Part 3: Implications

- (1) Very important to take a firm, systematic framing of redistributive land reform – if the perspective is to be truly pro-poor.
  - (a) Using LR as framework for addressing the land question in ‘non-private lands’.
  - (b) rejecting land transactions in private lands that do not entail real net transfer of wealth and power from the elite to the poor.
  - (c) treating a progressive and truly redistributive complementary share tenancy/leasehold reforms.

Bottomline line is: ‘effective control’ by the poor over land (plus water/forest etc.), can be: individual or community/collective; can be fully privatized or long-term lease from the state/community.

- (2) Such a re-framing can facilitate a better and more appropriate cross-national exchanges of experiences and comparative analysis.
- (3) Such reframing can provide better handle to trace causality between land property rights, poverty eradication and agrarian transformation that is clearly pro-poor

Only after making such a clarification can the basic foundations of land reform and its relationship to poverty eradication and development, as argued in the past and at present, be re-emphasized – having four pillars:

- (1) Autonomous rural poor people's movements (autonomous from the state and non-state/NGO actors)
- (2) Critical mass of reformist state actors
- (3) Systematic and large scale public support services
- (4) Growth-oriented macro socioeconomic policies that provide better chances for small family farms and rural proletariat

'Sandwich strategy' = conflict-ridden, multi-level state-society contestation (local-national-international), autonomy-enhancing/capacity-building; notion of 'space'.

Only in this context that LR can be truly poverty-eradicating – and not just a marginal poverty-alleviating project without any significant impact on the pre-existing agrarian structure.