

What is Agrarian Reform?

Agrarian reform, or AR, is the redistribution of public and private agricultural lands, regardless of produce and tenurial arrangement, to landless farmers and regular farm workers, to include support services and other arrangements alternative to distribution of land such as production/profit sharing, labor organization, or distribution of shares of stock.¹

Agrarian reform most often refers to transfer from ownership by a relatively small number of wealthy (or noble) owners with extensive land holdings (e.g. plantations, large ranches, or agribusiness plots) to individual or collective ownership by those who work the land. Agrarian reform usually refers to government-initiated or government-backed redistribution of — i.e. transfer of ownership of (or tenure in) — agricultural land.²

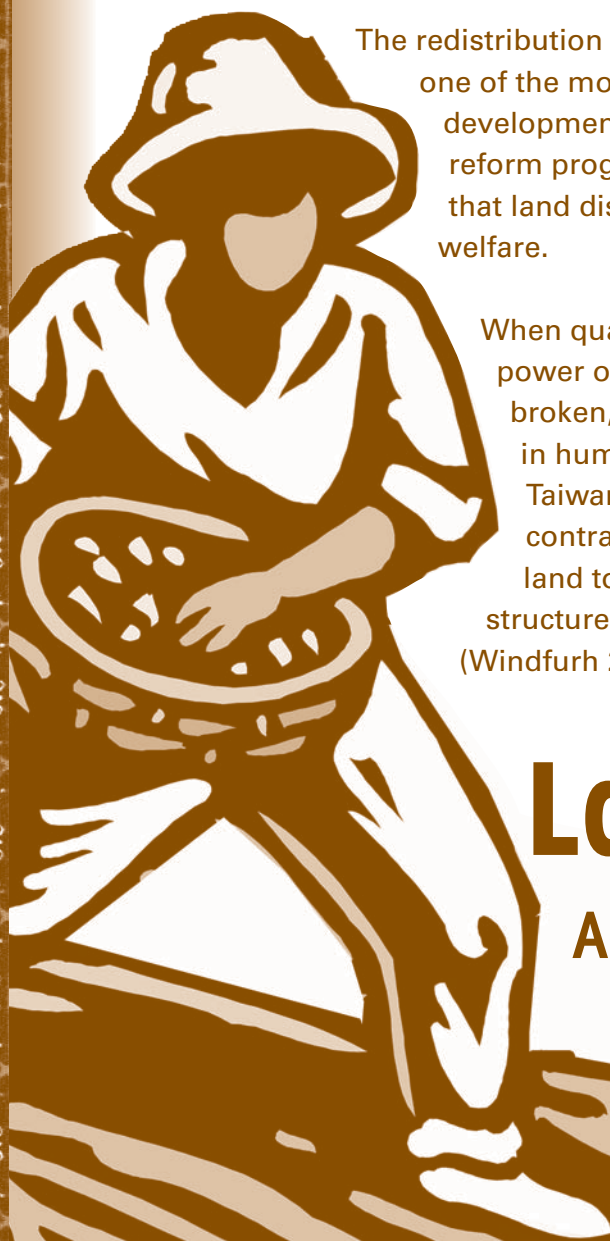
Does Agrarian reform help the country become prosperous economically?

The redistribution of land to landless and land-poor rural families is one of the most important measures to be taken to foster rural development. Studies of the outcome of virtually every land reform program carried out in the Third World since 1945 show that land distribution is a very effective way to improve rural welfare.

When quality land was really distributed to the poor, and the power of the rural oligarchy to distort and 'capture' policies broken, real, measurable poverty reduction and improvement in human welfare was the result. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Cuba and China are successful examples given. In contrast, countries with reforms that gave only poor quality land to beneficiaries, and /or failed to alter the rural power structures failed to make a major improvement in rural poverty (Windfurh 2002: 2).

Land to the Tiller

Agrarian Reform STILL a vital strategy for development





Land ownership unleashes the energy of millions of tillers since they can now plan long term and decide many things independently, such as what to plant, when to plant, to whom to sell his or her produce. With credit, extension, technology, and various infrastructure support, they increase their productivity and income, and therefore their purchasing power. With expanded domestic market, various businesses grow, paving the way to industrialization. Industrialization further develops more efficient farm technologies that will give farmers more time for other jobs; and therefore further increasing their income. With more efficiency in various businesses, the country can start to compete in the world market and earn foreign currencies which further boost and expand domestic economy.

Politically, agrarian reform helps farmers become independent producers and voters. Without landlords deciding for them, farmers are able to vote for good people in government and in their cooperative societies, exact greater accountability and better public service.

Culturally, agrarian reform is basically a social justice program which uplifts and affirms the inherent dignity of people. They in turn become responsible citizens with confidence to face the rest of society, ushering in greater unity and peace .

Did agrarian reform brought development in Asian countries?

Have you ever wondered why Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are among the most developed in Asia and in the world? They were able to beat poverty and their governments have ensured greater

prosperity among its citizens. Some three generations ago they were as poor as most Asian countries. But they developed very fast as nations when they decided to make the majority of their population – the farmers- prosperous. Many scholars have attributed their economic progress to the successful implementation of a comprehensive agrarian reform program.

Japan , before in 1868, was predominantly an agricultural country controlled by hundreds of semi-independent feudal lords, was militarily weak and had little technological development. However, just a year after, the new emperor Meije, requested the feudal lords to give up their domains, and in 1871 these domains were abolished and transformed into prefectures of a unified central state. The feudal lords were offered a yearly stipend, which was later changed to a one-time payment in government bonds.

The abolition of feudalism made possible tremendous social and political changes. Millions of people were suddenly free to choose their occupation and move about without restrictions. By providing a new environment of political and financial security, the government made possible investment in new industries and technologies. The government led the way in this, building railway and shipping lines, telegraph and telephone systems, three shipyards, ten mines, five munitions works, and fifty-three consumer industries (making sugar, glass, textiles, cement, chemicals, and other important products).

Taiwan was an agrarian based economy characterized by the concentration of large landholdings in the hands of the few before World War II. The province of Taiwan was where the Kuo Mintang Party of Chiang Kai Shek retreated in late 1940s



when the Communist Party led by Mao Tse Tung took control of the Mainland China. Chiang Kai Shek's earlier stages of agrarian reform program focused on the equitable distribution of farmlands to allow farmers to till their own lands. The government compensated the landowners by offering them stocks in state enterprises, which was deemed useless by most farm owners. Although some landowners did not appreciate such compensation, they were given no other option under the military rule. The government also reconstructed agricultural production facilities and infrastructure, improved agricultural research and extension work, provided credit facilities such as the fertilizer barter program for rice and restructured farmers' organizations into farmers' associations as well as production and marketing teams (AsiaDHRRA and AFA 2004: 58).

What are the necessary ingredients of a successful agrarian reform program?

Based on the experiences of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, we can say that successful agrarian reform has three necessary ingredients.

First, the governments gave farmers their land to till. They made and implemented laws to force the landowners to sell their land to the government at very cheap prices while making it easier for farmers to buy the land from the government. That made the farmers very happy and they actively helped in implementing the law. For generations, their ancestors, parents and themselves have been slaves of absentee landowners. They planted only what their landowners told them to plant.

They were only given very small share of their produce. They were always hungry and could not send their children to school. Many of them died very young. But now, they could finally own the land they till, a hectare on the average, and start to dream and plan to make the land more productive.

Second, the government helped the farmers to grow more food and increase further their income. Irrigation systems were built so that they would have continuous flow of water especially for their rice farms. The government established agricultural research stations and sent agriculturists to teach them modern farm technologies. Production loans, fertilizers and pesticides were made available to increase yield. Farm machineries were invented to make it easier to cultivate the land, weed, and harvest the produce. Warehouses and farm to market roads were built to facilitate stocking and marketing of produce. Then the government made subsidies to ensure that the price of farm products were high so that the farmers would always have profit.

Finally, the government supported the formation of agricultural associations and/or cooperatives so that the farmers will be able to help themselves. The farmers in turn became very active and enthusiastic to form their own organizations and cooperatives because they knew that they will earn more if they help each other acquire information, facilities, loans and other government support for their production, marketing and processing needs. While there were previous attempts already at forming cooperatives, only when the agrarian reform programs were implemented did these cooperatives take off.



What is the Agrarian Reform status in selected countries in Asia?

Many other countries in South East Asia have not effectively implemented agrarian reform yet. While there were attempts in Philippines and Indonesia, various factors undermined the implementation of the agrarian reform law prominent; foremost were the intense landlord resistance coupled by weak political will. In countries such as Cambodia and Laos, the Communist Party leadership later on facilitated farmers' individual ownership of land. However, in Cambodia, Land registration processes were problematic; these slowed down the distribution of land certificates. Thailand, on the other hand, needs a legislation on agrarian reform.

The Philippines came out with a Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law in 1988, following the 1986 People Power revolution against the Marcos dictatorship. The law covered less than one third (8 million hectares) of the total land area (30 million hectares) of the country and has distributed most of the covered government-owned lands and lands offered voluntarily for sale by landowners. Most of these lands were least productive and far from market centers. Yet a million hectare of most productive agricultural lands, mostly sugar, coconut, and banana plantations owned by powerful landlords have not been distributed after 17 years of the agrarian reform program. Poverty incidence among agrarian reform beneficiaries is at 45%.

In Indonesia, 70 percent of half of its more than 210 million population are engaged in farming activities in 70 % of total arable land (192 million hectares). 16% of the population control 69% of the entire land, while 84% percent of the population

control only 31%. Farmers who have land own an average of only .2 hectare while the majority remains landless. (AsiaDHRRA and AFA 2004: 102). Agrarian reform was enacted in 1960 but was not implemented by the Suharto government. Since the reformation the legislative body and the President made decisions to strengthen implementation of agrarian reform law and the decentralization of authority in overcoming agrarian conflicts. But there were strong doubts they will get implemented in favor of the small farmers. Meanwhile the Megawati administration gave power to Commercial Agricultural Enterprises to take over and develop agricultural lands. The growing peasant-based "reclaiming movement" on the other hand were resisting and reclaiming lands grabbed by Corporations supported by the military.

In Thailand, 41 % of total land area (53 million hectares) is devoted to agriculture of which 52% (11 million hectares) is planted to paddy rice. Lands distributed by government to farmers were from the forest reservation area and of poor quality and lacks irrigation. There is no comprehensive land reform policy that exists that could provide for the distribution of lands in the hands of big landowners to landless farmers. As in the Philippines and Indonesia, there is also no progressive taxation system imposed on landowners who do not cultivate the land.

In Laos, 1.3 million or 80% of the active labor force work in agriculture under a one-party Communist state but a market economy since 1991. The average area for cultivation per household is estimated at 1,600 sqm and 10,600 sqm. for non irrigated areas. In general, farmers cultivate their own land. Land use ownership is usually obtained through family inheritance or by buying land use



rights from owners. The Land Use Law of 1997 sets the allowed area of land for use in agriculture per one labor force as follows: rice and fishery production (1 ha.), industrial and annual crops (3 has), fruit tree crops (3 has), and pasture land (for animals) (15 has).

In Cambodia, 85% of the 17 million population live in the rural area. Two out of every five Cambodians live below poverty line. While most farming households have access to land, each farm household own only about a hectare and female-headed households, only about half a hectare. Since the re-privatization of land and redistribution of small parcels to rural households in 1989, following the end of Khmer Rouge regime, only about 10 percent have been granted ownership certificates and many have only temporary certificates. Currently, there is a Land Law but its implementation is observed to be inefficient. More so, the government is perceived to be lacking the institutional capacity to handle the administrative, technical and legal aspects of land registration (ANGOC 2001:36). The government has been implementing a Land Administration Project with the World Bank since 1999, aimed to address these incapacities.

Current SEA Models/Initiatives on Agrarian Reform

TriPARRD by PhilDHRRA

How to implement agrarian reform in democratic countries such as the Philippines and lately Indonesia is a big challenge. So far most successful agrarian reform models in Asia are those from countries under a military rule. In the Philippines, one key sector that engaged itself in the agrarian reform legislation and implementation was its vibrant civil society group. NGOs led by PhilDHRRA,

a national network of NGOs and an AsiaDHRRA member, agreed to help the government in implementing the then newly-enacted Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law by organizing the potential farmer-beneficiaries, educating them on the implementation processes and mobilizing them to participate actively in three-party councils at the municipal and provincial levels. The program, which started in 1987, was called Tripartite Partnership for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development or TriPARRD; as it was a partnership among three entities: government, non-government/NGOs and farmers' groups, both at the local and national levels.

A technical committee from national academic institutions, PhilDHRRA, PAKISAMA, and the central office of the Department of Agrarian Reform assisted the provincial-based tripartite partnerships in various education, research, and resource mobilization activities. The program was pilot-tested in four provinces and in 42 agrarian reform communities which lessons were made available to other groups in many other communities later on.

When the program ended ten years after, most of the lands in the prototype communities were distributed to the farmers, and they have various projects increasing their productivity and income. They were also able to build viable organizations of farmer-beneficiaries federated at the provincial levels in the pilot provinces which continued to help and put pressure to government to implement the agrarian reform program more efficiently and effectively. Both at the local and national levels, the concepts, processes and mechanisms developed under the TriPARRD program were eventually mainstreamed in the



various strategies and programs of the Department of Agrarian Reform.

Land Reclamation and Legislative Work by InDHRRA (Sekretariat Bina Desa)

Sekretariat Bina Desa, an AsiaDHRRA member, facilitates reclamation of lands by partner farmers' groups. Landless farmers are empowered to occupy government and corporation owned lands. The campaigns involved deploying NGO activists in the rural areas to work with landless farmers in their campaigns. The "reclaiming movement" in Indonesia has already taken place in areas such as West, East and Central Java, Sulawesi, West Sumatera, Lampung and Palembang. For example, the association of Lampung Farmers succeeded in reclaiming 100,000 hectares of land in Lampung, 4,000 has in Malang and 3,140 has in Cianjur.

Bina Desa, together with KPA, a consortium of agrarian reform advocates in the country, have influenced the People Assembly (MPR) to immediately issue the Agrarian Reform Decree; People Assembly Decree No.IX, 2001 on Agrarian Reform and Natural Resources Management. They have assisted the government in the setting up of a special body directly under the President called the National Commission on Agrarian Conflict Resolution (KNUPKA), to solve the agrarian conflicts and violence against peasants, fisherfolks, and indigenous communities.

Vietnamese Government

Today, Vietnam is one of the fastest growing economies in South East Asia. It is following the formula of success of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Its government finally recognized, after several years of collective farming after the war with US, the importance of

providing incentives to individual farmers by allowing them to reap the fruits of their labor in a particular piece of land guaranteed for their or their heir's use for a long time. The government is providing the best support it could afford to make the farmers and the farms productive in a sustainable manner. It works hand in hand with established national farmers' federation with branches in almost all villages. In a few years after this change happened in the early 90's, Vietnam started to export rice and is now the second largest rice exporter in the world, exporting 4.5 million tons in 1999. It cut almost by half its poverty incidence, from 25% in 1990 to 15.7% in 1999.

What are most pressing issues in agrarian reform implementation?

The implementation of state-led agrarian reform in many democratic countries has been very difficult primarily because of strong resistance from ruling elite-landlords and the huge government budget required for landowners' compensation. This is coupled by problems in land administration processes and protocols. Moreover, landless farmers in many of these countries remain to be poorly organized, if at all. With poor budgets, weak farmers' organizations and strong resistance of landlords who are also entrenched in political and economic power structures, governments remain to lack the necessary political will to implement agrarian reform effectively, if there is any program at all.

The World Bank has pioneered and implemented on an international scale, several projects on land tenure to address the above mentioned concerns, among which are the following, below. But these projects have been heavily criticized by



agrarian reform advocates all over the world because the projects espouse the “land market” paradigm.

The Market-Assisted Agrarian Reform. The World Bank pioneered a market-assisted agrarian reform program which was pilot-tested in the Philippines, South Africa, and Brazil. The idea was for government to assist the farmers to get loans to buy the land offered by a landlord in a willing-buyer, willing-seller arrangement. This is fraught with risks. Landowners often choose to sell only the most marginal, most remote, and most ecologically fragile plots that they own (steep slopes, rainforests, desert margins, etc.), many of which may not presently be in production, and they are often sold at exorbitant prices. This project has been criticized also because it promotes the abdication of government of its role in redistributing land primarily as a social justice measure. Rather, it promotes land as a commodity, where an individual or a corporation with enough capital can acquire agricultural lands.

WB Land Administration Project. Another international project by the World Bank involves the improvement of a government’s land administration systems, processes and services. The Land Administration Project has for its ultimate objective of alleviating poverty and enhancing economic growth by improving the security of land tenure and fostering efficient land markets in both rural and urban areas. The project has been implemented in several Asian countries, notably in Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia, as well as in several Latin American countries. The main criticism in this project is that it tends to facilitate and support the market-assisted agrarian reform program.

Land titling, registries, and facilitation of land markets all seem to meet the demands of farmers for secure title to their land. Yet in today’s free market macroeconomic environments this can induce mass sell-offs of land, causing increased landlessness, land concentration, and rural-urban migration. This “re-concentration” of land is occurring rapidly today in many parts of the world (Rosett 2001: 4).

Land as Collateral. Another idea that is being pushed especially in the Philippines no less than by the President is the legislation making land awarded to farmer-beneficiaries available as collateral in loan transactions. While to a certain extent, this may help the farmers gain more access to credit using its land asset, the fear of many agrarian reform advocates is that it will lead to a massive land consolidation in the hands of those who can buy lands. This fear is not without basis especially considering that even without the law around a third already of those who received land under agrarian reform for the past three decades have either mortgaged or sold their lands already. As with the market-assisted land reform program, this idea relinquishes government’s basic role in providing necessary credit and capital support for agrarian reform farmer beneficiaries.

What can small farmers and NGO advocates do?

The development of agriculture and of the country depends to a large extent on factors such as the political will and skills of government and peasant organizations to undertake thorough reforms especially in the area of land distribution and in the provision of necessary support services. Increasingly, the role of NGOs



in this process especially in catalyzing the formation of knowledgeable and assertive peasant organizations especially in democratic/democratizing countries cannot be overemphasized. Other second-generation problems that will be brought about especially by globalization could be dealt with more adequately if the basics or the fundamentals of agrarian reform have been successfully dealt with.

Concrete actions that can be done by AFA and AsiaDHRRRA members include:

- AFA and AsiaDHRRRA members must continuously advocate to and work with national governments and private sector in the pursuit of genuine and effective agrarian reform program that (i) gives stewardship/ownership of land to men and women tillers , (ii) abolish feudal and tenancy relationships and (iii) recognize male and female indigenous people's rights to ancestral domains
- Organize and strengthen local community organizations and farmers associations for claim-making on land rights
- At the regional level, push for an ASEAN constitution on agrarian reform and sustainable rural development

Farmers' Access to Land is a Basic Obligation of the State

Farmers' groups in developing countries who have yet to implement genuine and effective agrarian reform should bear in mind that access to productive resources like land has been a commitment of many governments since 1979 during the World Council for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD). Governments, multilateral institutions and the United Nations have always recognized that access to land resources significantly contribute positively to the eradication of poverty and hunger, to peace and

human security and even to sustainable development. Owning the lands you till is a basic farmers' right that has to be protected and promoted by governments. Alas, with current paradigms of commodification of land , agrarian reform is not to be handed down by governments on a silver platter. It has to be fought with passion and perseverance. But, as many have experienced, agrarian reform will be always worth the fight.

Notes

- ¹ www.edu.cebuestates.com/agrarian-land-reform/1concepts-exemptions-retention.htm
- ² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrarian_reform

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