

**abstract** This article explores key issues around land and agrarian reforms. Beginning with definitions, it moves on to discuss debates over political intent and economic outcomes of (redistributionist) reforms as well as three current issues: gender, land rights and land reforms; neoliberal 'reforms' and land titling and land reforms' contemporary relevance. It concludes that land and agrarian reforms continue to be of much importance for poverty alleviation, food security and sustainable agriculture, particularly in a world framed by neoliberal policies.

**keywords** agrarian reform ♦ food security ♦ gender and land rights ♦ land reform ♦ land redistribution ♦ land rights ♦ rural classes

This entry discusses agrarian and land reforms. What are the purposes of agrarian and land reforms, and what circumstances provoke or enable them? How do agrarian reforms around the world differ from one another? Is the issue of agrarian reform still current in circumstances of globalization? The entry provides an overview of several themes. The first section analyses theoretical and political perspectives, including definitional disputes and political rationales for agrarian reforms. The second discusses some empirical questions, and reviews relevant evidence: topics include economic and environmental reasons for agrarian reforms and the debate over optimum size of farms. The third section examines current issues and controversies, including gender 'disruptions', neoliberalism and land 'reform' and whether agrarian reforms are still a necessity.

The terms 'land reform' and 'agrarian reform' often overlap but are not precisely the same. 'Agrarian reform' is considered to have a wider meaning than 'land' reform. A situation of 'agrarian' reform covers not only a wide redistribution of land but also the provision of infrastructure, services and, sometimes, a whole programme of redistributive and democratic reforms. 'Land' reform refers to a narrower redistribution of land, usually to a limited group of beneficiaries. However, in practice, the two are often used interchangeably.

## Theoretical and political perspectives

### *What is agrarian reform?*

The classic definitions of agrarian and land reform belong to the 'moment' of developmental states. Particularly after the Second World War and decolonization, it was assumed that the state and state policy could be a motor of development and societal restructuring. Agrarian reforms are one example of such developmentalist policies. The assumption was that the state would provide support services, and that redistribution of income and property would provide overall social benefits. The classic examples are in South Korea and Taiwan, but the Chinese state also played a developmental role, as did others such as the Mexican state or the Zimbabwean state before the late 1990s.

In this paradigm, land reform comprises:

- i) compulsory takeover of land, usually by the state, from the biggest landowners and with partial compensation, and
- ii) farming of that land in such a way as to spread the benefits of the man-land [sic] relationship more widely than before the takeover. ... Land reform, so defined is an equalising policy, at least in intention. (Lipton, 1974)

Land reform entails change in agrarian structure

resulting in increased access to land by the rural poor and secured tenure for those who actually work the land (Ghimire, 2001: 7). Small cultivators should obtain greater control over the use of land and better terms in their relationships with the rest of society.

Agrarian reform, then, constitutes widespread redistribution of land. It aims to empower poor peasants and to alter the agrarian and class structure of rural society. Some argue that agrarian reform is therefore a revolutionary political concept rather than a reformist one. Solon Barraclough wrote:

It implies changes in power relationships towards greater participation of the rural poor in decision making at all levels and especially in decisions directly affecting their livelihoods. In other words, it has revolutionary implications. (Barraclough, 1991: 102)

In practice, however, redistributive land reforms are often much less than revolutionary and take place for a variety of reasons and in a variety of circumstances. These circumstances range from widespread mobilization to benefit poor peasants, tenants and the landless, to 'top down' reforms by authoritarian states. Peru's 1968 land reform, for instance, was instituted autonomously by the military government. Other reforms take place due to external influence. For instance, the extensive and successful land reforms in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea were instituted due to pressure by the USA, and in order to forestall socialist mobilization by giving smallholders more of a stake in the system. It was felt that more equitable landholdings would provide a basis for a democratic society (Montgomery, 1984; Prosterman and Riedinger, 1987). In Latin America, the US-backed Alliance for Progress carried out land reforms with similar intent. The US government saw land reforms with individual family tenure as the 'perfect package', a solution that would increase rural incomes, boost industrialization processes and calm peasant unrest (Deere and León, 1987; Thiesenhusen, 1995).

The question of agrarian reform fell off the political agenda in the 1980s, only to be 'reinstated' as a matter for debate and action later in the decade (Borras, 2003; FAO, 2000). However, this is in pursuit of an altered situation in which neoliberal policies have become dominant, in line with IMF and World Bank policies. Altered meanings of land 'reform' are discussed later in the article. This article uses the terms 'agrarian reform' and 'land reform' to indicate redistributive reforms, usually with state backing.

### *Political debates over agrarian and land reform*

**Political rationales:** Political rationales for agrarian and land reform have been debated particularly within Marxist theory. In practice, political and economic rationales overlap. However, since some schools of thought treat land reform either exclusively in terms of 'efficiency' or else mainly as a matter of pragmatic necessity, economic rationales are discussed in a later section.

Political rationales for land reform differ according to varying interests and viewpoints. For many, a prime aim of land reform has been to break landlord power. Especially in societies in which agriculture remains of economic importance, landowners may be important government players and power brokers, especially at local and regional levels. Some governments, as noted, have nevertheless been prepared to concede reform to quell peasant unrest that might lead to wider radicalization. Or more positively, they have seen land reform as a way of strengthening the rural poor and transforming them into a new class of smallholders with a stake in society.

Land reform is often seen as crucial for the civil and human rights of sharecroppers, tenant farmers and agricultural labourers. Possession of a parcel of land, even a small one, can give some basis to resist the demands and encroachments of landlords. Under the former feudal or feudal-like systems of Europe, Japan and colonial Latin America, such domination was enshrined in law and custom. However, the power of the *hacendado* in Latin America and of landowning classes elsewhere often has feudal echoes in its arbitrariness. On remote estates in countries such as Brazil and South Africa, landowners may be able to exercise quasi-legal as well as economic powers, becoming in effect the rural political authority. Personal autonomy may thus be one of the most important gains of agrarian reform (Barraclough, 1991). Thus, increasing individual rights of peasants and the rural poor has been one of the aims of land and agrarian reform movements: this emphasis is usually associated with individual household models of land reform.

Movements for land reform have often been associated with the left but they can also be related to a range of political motivations and associations. These may include ethnic and racialized mobilizations in which groups seek to reclaim lands lost to colonists, settlers or to corporate interests (Christodoulou, 1990). Relatedly, such claims can be tied to a nationalist agenda wherein land may symbolize collective identity; the US-backed agrarian reforms in Asia, for instance, had nationalist under-

tones. Increased demands by landowners or rising expectations among peasants can create conditions for militant movements. For instance, in Ucureña, Bolivia, a breach in traditional relations also played a part in the development of a peasant movement for land. This grew from a desire to regain past conditions of land tenure (Huizer, 2001) but led to a mobilization that became national. Other movements such as those in the ex-settler societies of Southern and Eastern Africa are explicitly nationalist and anti-colonialist.

Attempts have been made to categorize different types of agrarian and land reforms, usually according to their wider political and economic intents. The nature of the government enacting reforms and the extent of land redistributed are also significant. Thus, revolutionary, conservative and liberal land reforms may be distinguished (Putzel, 1992). These categories are demarcated by policy with regard to several variables, including the form of property rights, transformation or maintenance of state structures and the process through which agrarian reform is achieved. For instance, 'revolutionary' reforms have often followed political uprisings that change state regimes. These might expropriate a large amount of agricultural land, redistribute it in collectives and plan for agrarian reform within a wider process of social change. A 'conservative' reform, conversely, leaves the basic social and political framework intact and usually redistributes less land. Land tends to be purchased by the state and redistributed to a particular group of cultivators for farming on a family or household basis. For instance in India, only 2 percent of rural producers benefited from land reforms by 1985 (Sobhan, 1993: 65). Despite deep and persistent poverty, land reform has been very limited. In India, state governments are responsible for enacting and implementing land reforms; the two states with egalitarian or radical policies, Kerala and West Bengal, have had the most widespread land redistributions (Ghatak and Roy, 2007). 'Liberal' agrarian or land reforms are more ambitious than is the conservative model, seeking better conditions for rural cultivators but without overall social change. Thus, in Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s, a large amount of land, 43 percent, was distributed to two-thirds of rural workers; by 1970, 57 percent had been distributed (Sobhan, 1993: 38). The extent of land reform is always an important indicator, regardless of stated intent. The great majority of programmes have been incomplete, either redistributing little land or else allowing landlord or large commercial farmers continued power (Bandyopadhyay, 1996).

*Does land reform increase differentiation of classes within the peasantry?* A related controversy concerns the role of class differentiation within the peasantry, relating to the political outcomes of agrarian reforms. As seen above, most redistributionist land reform programmes aim to increase both the incomes and power of poorer peasants and the landless. Such reform aims to reduce the gap between large landowners and the land-hungry and thus to have a levelling effect. The wider and more radical the land reform, the more pronounced such an effect will be. However, many arguments in favour of land reform follow a populist perspective in seeing 'the peasantry' or 'the rural poor' as one, undifferentiated grouping. Such a perspective ignores the unequal distribution of resources within rural populations, even among the poor. Leaving aside the question of gender inequality, agrarian smallholders have different resource endowments – land, inputs, livestock and capital.

In Lenin's formulation, the peasantry could not be seen as one class but was subdivided into:

1. 'Wealthy' peasants or *kulaks*: peasants who were not, or not yet capitalists but who had above-average holdings and associated inputs, and who hired in labour on a small/medium scale.
2. 'Middle' peasants who were mainly self-subsistent, utilizing family labour and whose production for the market was limited.
3. 'Poor' peasants who did not hold sufficient land and inputs for family subsistence and who had to resort to wage labour on a temporary or permanent basis.
4. Relatedly, the agricultural proletariat was not technically a 'peasantry' but landless rural workers often had kinship and social links to other groups (Lenin, 1977).

The vision of land reform for many is the creation of an egalitarian rural sector. However, this depends upon enforcement of strict ceilings on the amount of land that can be held per household and the curtailment of attempts to accumulate property. For instance, in the Vietnamese redistribution following decollectivization, strict land ceilings were enforced. These ranged from 2 to 4 hectares (approximately 5–10 acres) and have prevented strong class differentiation (Watts, 1998). Unless land ceilings are low and are enforced, redistribution of land may increase differentiation *between* peasants. Those better endowed with fertile land, livestock, agricultural implements and machinery, access to credit and the ability to use these effectively are likely to become

wealthier. The livelihoods of others may stagnate. They may become poorer or eventually lose their land.

Moreover, 'classic' peasants are not the only rural poor. Other groups also have an immediate interest in land reforms, such as agricultural workers, whether casually or regularly employed, tenants and sharecroppers (Christodoulou, 1990). More privileged rural groupings such as full-time traders and professionals may retain some rights in land. Thus the interests of different socioeconomic groupings often diverge. For instance, should workers on an agricultural estate receive rights to the land they help cultivate, or should land-hungry smallholders on nearby lands receive the redistributed land instead? This is a current issue in Zimbabwe, where farm workers were marginalized from the 'fast-track' land reform process (Jacobs, 2003; Rutherford, 2008; Sachikonye, 2003). In Kerala state, splits occurred in a widespread land reform during the 1970s (Herring, 1990). Reforms in Kerala resolved one class contradiction, between landlords and tenants. But another division was exacerbated, between newly-landed cultivators and field tenants. Having acquired land, the new smallholders pursued their economic interests and attempted to become 'larger' peasants. In this situation, clearly further redistribution to field labourers was needed.

It is possible to inhibit the growth of class differentiation within redistributive agrarian reforms. Lessening differentiation would entail setting low land ceilings, as noted. It would also entail making legal provisions concerning alienation of land. These measures in turn imply both political will and state capacity.

These observations concerning social class do not detract from the view that reducing differentiation between large landowners and the mass of rural producers is an important aim. This is perhaps evident in the fierce resistance to land redistribution on the part of landowners in various parts of the world. Redistributive land reform does weaken the landed aristocracy or agrarian bourgeoisie, and strengthens smaller-scale producers. However, land reform also exacerbates the tendency to increased differentiation among beneficiaries.

**Private or public property?** A third controversy related to political rationales concerns the contradictions of private property within land reforms. This has, again, been a question taken up within Marxism. Classic Marxist theory concentrates on the role of the industrial proletariat in leading the way towards and securing a 'new' socialist society and economic organization. Therefore, Marxist analysis has not focused on peasants or on agriculture. This

sector has been viewed either as a problem or simply as subordinate to the urban and industrial working class. Debates on the peasant or 'agrarian question' focused on the role of agriculture within capitalist accumulation processes, and on the wider question of whether peasantries would persist or would disappear – that is, become marginalized – with industrial development (see discussion in Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2009).

For socialists, the policy concern was how (socialist) agriculture should be organized, in an era when policy alternatives to capitalism were envisaged. This debate in turn is related both to how the peasantry is viewed and to assumptions about scale and productivity (see later). Peasants as a class have been viewed as conservative and as backward, while agrarian reform is seen as a necessary democratic step away from feudalism. Agrarian reform has also been important in securing the peasantry as allies to the proletariat, the 'leading force' of revolutions. However, peasants are also viewed with suspicion, as petty commodity producers and as small property holders (see above). As such, their class interests are in opposition to feudal landlords and to big capital but differ from those of the proletariat. Thus it did not follow that peasants' interests were seen as fitting in easily with a collective or socialist state. Rosa Luxemburg (1973) wrote in *The Accumulation of Capital* that peasants would fiercely defend their newly won property against a socialist state. The petty agricultural sector would potentially oppose socialist organization. Political doubts were accompanied by economic ones. A common assumption was that since in industry, larger units are the most efficient, this would also be the case in agriculture (see later section). These issues were debated at length in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, particularly between Bukharin and Preobrazhinskii (see e.g. Lewin, 1968).

Different shades of opinion existed about these complex questions. However, a common view among Marxists and other socialists was that agriculture should be collectivized. This would at once solve the perceived political problem of the peasantry and the economic one of 'low' productivity in small peasant agriculture. In practice, the economic results of Stalinist collectivizations in the Soviet Union, China and in many other societies were sometimes disastrous; even where famine was avoided, they usually failed to enhance productivity. Top-down state-imposed collectivizations were usually highly unpopular (Lewin, 1968; Lipton, 1993) and drastically underestimated peasant resistance to collective forms. It might be said that advocates of collectivization saw the questions raised mainly in political and theoretical terms; in practice, however, the operation

of collectives was linked with economic issues.

Experiences of transition to socialist agriculture were not uniform. Deere (1986), in a review of transition in smaller states, stresses the variety of transition paths, some allowing private property holdings. Prior productive and agrarian structures also influence transition paths. Additionally, a range of collective institutions exists, including not only state farms but production and other cooperatives, which sometimes allowed greater worker participation.

Perhaps ironically, decollectivizations in the 1980s and 1990s have enacted some of the largest redistributive land reforms in history. As such, they have reconstituted peasantries in a number of societies. In some societies such as China or Vietnam, rural producers or peasants constituted the majority of the population; in others, such as most of Eastern Europe, peasants formed smaller groupings.

## Empirical questions and evidence

### *Economic and environmental reasons for agrarian and land reform*

There exists wide consensus about the need for agrarian reform to alleviate rural poverty and hunger (Ghimire, 2001: 1) as well as for environmental reasons.

Ecological arguments for land reform have come to the fore in recent years. It is argued that peasants with enough fertile land to farm will be less likely to encroach on rainforests, as occurred in Brazil, or to cultivate and to further degrade low-lying, unsuitable land, as in Bangladesh (Handelman, 2009). Those who are poor and hungry may be prone to harm or destroy their immediate environments in order to survive. Marginal agricultural lands may be overused or grasslands, overgrazed. Alternatively, people are often forced to migrate to cities which already have dense populations and rural areas may become depopulated. Land reform programmes can themselves encroach on fragile environments under pressure to distribute land (Dekker, 2003). Agrarian reform, if properly organized and administered, however, can be a potential bulwark against increasing environmental degradation driven by poverty. The MST (Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil is attempting to foster sustainable agricultural methods in its settlements, for instance. In general, the hope is that agrarian reforms will promote ideas of stewardship towards the environment. The extent to which this takes place in practice must be determined empirically.

Although many reasons for land and agrarian reform have been put forward (see above), the need for food security remains of greatest importance.

The three most important reasons for land reform at the economic level are:

1. To raise agricultural productivity;
2. To strengthen food security and to lessen poverty for rural households; and
3. To facilitate industrialization by 'feeding the cities'.

Redistribution of land is seen as a way to raise agricultural productivity and therefore to lessen poverty. Redistribution ensures land is utilized fully, given that many large agricultural estates contain underutilized land. Additionally, smallholders are considered to have more incentives than *latifundistas* to make productive investments. Land reforms are not always sufficient to guarantee escape from rural poverty (de Janvry et al., 2001). But they do provide sources of income and also insurance against price shocks. A growing literature shows the importance of land reform to physical capital formation and for economic growth (Dekker, 2003). Comparative analysis demonstrates that agrarian reform is important in reducing rural poverty and in raising productivity (El Ghonemy, 1990). However, partial implementation of land reform leaves a situation in which large landowners can exercise great influence over land transactions and over policy (El Ghonemy, 1990; Ntsebeza and Hall, 2007). For this reason, more comprehensive reforms are often more efficacious.

A second, related, argument for land reform is its potential role in food security. Possession of or rights to land would allow peasant households both to cultivate food crops and to sell any cash crops produced instead of having the proceeds skimmed off by a landlord. This point has gender implications, given the widely cited observation that women attend to household food security across many societies (Koopman, 1997).

A further potential benefit of land redistribution is that it helps to broaden the home market through increasing incomes, consumption and purchasing power. Industrialization processes are thereby encouraged. This assumes a model of developmentalist industrialization rather than industry based on export markets. A negative example is the Soviet Union, where collective agriculture was deliberately 'squeezed' until the 1960s in order to contribute to industrialization. In other examples, a relatively egalitarian agrarian reform has contributed to subsequent industrialization. These examples have been concentrated in East Asia: Japan, Taiwan and South Korea (Bandyopadhyay, 1996).

Recently, arguments have also been made for economic rights as 'human rights'. These can perhaps be

distinguished from individual rights, as economic rights refer in part to group rights. For instance, the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) establishes a right to livelihood. The right to a livelihood and to food security is being claimed by some social movements as a human right to be campaigned for (FIAN, 2004; Moyo and Yeros, 2005; and see later section), and this may have implications for agrarian reforms.

### *Empirical debates: large units or small?*

Controversy has long raged over 'efficiency' and the optimal scale or size of landholdings – related closely to the issue of food security. In his writings on the *Agrarian Question* (1988 [1899]), Kautsky first noted that the usual economies of scale found in industry do not obtain in agriculture. That is, small farms are usually more productive than larger ones. The central argument is that peasant family farms are able to utilize labour more intensively than are larger and more mechanized ones. Additionally, it is contended that productivity is lower on large farms primarily because they rely on hired labour, which is more expensive and less efficient than unwaged family workers (Binswanger and Elgin, 1993: 34). Relatedly, crops might benefit from close attention not required to the same degree within industry. This phenomenon is termed the 'inverse relationship', or IR. The IR has been used to explain the persistence of family farming and of the peasantry into the era of industrial capitalism and beyond (Bernstein, 2001; Lipton, 1993). The IR is crucial in terms of the economic rationale for land reform. If small peasant farming is indeed more efficient than large-scale farming, then this constitutes a powerful argument for redistributive land reform to peasant households.

The importance of the IR is such that it merits further exploration. It should be noted, however, that many local factors within agriculture are significant in terms of productivity. For instance, important factors include overall land concentration, which crops are produced, soil type, how crops and farms are managed and what technologies and machinery are available. Demographic factors such as size and composition of families also play a part.

The controversy over the IR has been recently revisited. Griffin et al. (2002) forcefully restate the case for redistributive land reform based on the greater productivity of small farming units. Rather than being inefficient because they cannot afford equipment such as tractors, small farms may adopt different techniques of production. This can lead to differences in productivity. Small farms tend to economize on capital, to cultivate land more intensively and to generate more employment per unit of land (Griffin et al., 2002: 286). Land redistribution

would thus raise output and rural incomes, bringing about more equal distribution of benefits.

The assumptions of the IR have been critiqued (Byers, 2004). The IR is seen as holding for *pre-capitalist* agriculture (Dyer, 2004) but as breaking down under the capitalist mode of production (Byers, 2004). In particular, large capitalist farms have access to new technologies that are able to enhance economies of scale. Additionally, critics hold that the main reason why small farmers intensify labour is poverty and unemployment, not 'labour preference' (see Sen, 1981: 209). The poorest intensify labour because their survival may depend upon doing so (Dyer, 2004). In response, Griffin et al. (2004) have replied that the benefits of land reform are not automatic. Land reform works most effectively when it is part of an overall strategy for rural development, or what I have referred to as agrarian reform. Rural needs such as improved access to credit, price reforms and improved physical infrastructure must also be met. One issue is that a minimum plot size might exist, although clearly minimum size will vary depending on the context. The authors acknowledge that some truth exists in the 'charge' that small farms may be unable to exploit economies of scale. However, this argument should not be overstated. Small farmers often make cooperative arrangements such as borrowing or leasing equipment. Relatedly, some agricultural functions can be combined – for instance, large combines or irrigators can be contracted out to small farms (Lipton, 1993).

## **Current issues in agrarian reform**

Certain questions concerning agrarian reform have been the subject of much controversy and debate, or else have emerged recently. I summarize three here. These concern: the 'disruptive' nature of gender within agrarian reforms; neoliberalism and land tenure reforms; and whether the question of agrarian reform remains of relevance today.

### *Gender disruptions*

Gender has received relatively little attention within the debates over land and agrarian reform. (However, see the work of Deere and León de Leal, 1987, 2001; see also Agarwal, 1994.) For instance, gender is crucial to the debate over the IR since women are often the main (or, important) agricultural producers, but the debate is treated as if the consequences were gender-neutral. The majority of the rural poor are female and so land reform and redistribution could clearly be of import (Jacobs, 2010). The predominant model of land reform, distribution to the individual household, however, usually marginalizes

women, especially wives. Land is usually redistributed to the 'household head', who nearly always is assumed to be a man. Comparative analysis of the studies of gender relations in land reform indicates both gains and losses for women.

The comments that follow are based on 29 empirical case studies, taken from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Despite wide variation in geographical regions, extent and intent of reform, in the status of women, in culture and religion and in kinship types, reforms in the household model have striking similarities (see Jacobs, 2009).

Some schemes, for instance in Honduras, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, allow female household heads to hold land, but in practice few benefit. In effect, male household heads may be confirmed as a new class of small landowning farmers since they hold land or land titles. Palmer (1985) argued that a married woman's access to land is akin to that of a bonded labourer. Land reform programmes can actually undermine women's land rights in another way. In some areas/regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, married women customarily have access to a plot of land on which to cultivate 'women's crops', generally food crops. Often this right has been eroded but often still exists. Most African studies report that women have lost such rights with land reform and land resettlement.

One of the main aims of land reform policy, as noted, is to raise peasant subsistence and income levels. Studies often find living standards and food security are improved by land reform, despite the burden of more (and heavier) work often entailed. Various studies report that peasant women and men are relieved that they have less worry about absolute food security. However, conditions on new land resettlement and land reform areas may be arduous and provision of services, poor.

Are women's own incomes raised as a result of increased household income? According to the literature, married women typically *lose* control of their own incomes while that of the household head rises. In this respect, this factor parallels that of women's own land. Nearly all studies reported similar results. Women lose income through the following factors: loss of access to raw materials and to land; loss of economic niches (i.e. trading and marketing opportunities) through the move itself; the need to travel very long distances; and loss of personal contacts. At the same time, men often acquire monopolies of new cash-cropping opportunities only available to women through the mediation of men. Men's new opportunities often increase their power vis-a-vis women in the household.

Decision-making is discussed in a several case studies. In Honduras, Libya, the Mwea scheme in

Kenya and Sri Lanka, women's scope for decision-making was reduced due to loss of women's land, due to greater surveillance by the husband, to the increase in male authority and *machismo* and due to women's greater confinement to the role of 'housewife'. The nuclear family model and other changes have usually meant that women have lost a degree of autonomy. Many women have benefited materially, it seems, but at the price of loss of room for manoeuvre inside and outside their households. The nuclear family model is often double-edged for women, meaning a growth in surveillance and control by the husband, but also more interdependence and potential influence.

The record of individual household model reforms (in which land is redistributed to individual families/households) is fairly negative: men have benefited at their wives' expense. 'Gender-blind' policies have meant some deterioration in women's position within marriage. And in most of the cases studied, women's situation will deteriorate markedly in the case of divorce, particularly without access to land. The allocation of land to male household 'heads' means that wives start out structurally disadvantaged vis-a-vis husbands within many land reform programmes. In order for land and agrarian reforms to benefit women as well as men, the biases displayed by most programmes must be addressed. However, most rural social movement activists are men, and raising gender issues is often seen as contentious, or as a distraction from class struggles, even in the early 21st century. Nevertheless, women in a number of countries are now agitating for land rights.

### *Neoliberal 'reforms'?*

The advent of market-based land tenure changes and reforms since the late 1980s and early 1990s has sometimes altered the understanding of 'agrarian reform'. As noted, the question of agrarian reform fell off the political agenda in the 1980s, only to be 'reinstated' later in the decade (Borras, 2003; FAO, 2000). However, this is in pursuit of an altered agenda in which neoliberal policies have become dominant, in line with IMF and World Bank policies. The state is seen as a less important actor and usually has command over declining resources after structural adjustment programmes. The term 'reform' itself has often become part of a neoliberal discourse which has to do with the dismantling of welfare and other state services, and deregulation of labour markets. In agriculture, this implies privatization of communal and collective land and titling of individual holdings as well as creation of a land market.

Since the 1970s, the World Bank has promoted land reform along with privatization, and the inter-

national financial institutions (IFIs) have designed many such programmes. In the 1980s, titling of land was considered to be the appropriate mechanism for privatization and economic liberalization (Toulmin and Quan, 2001). Reforms to land tenure were advocated alongside setting up reforms of macroeconomic policy, structural adjustment and orientation to production of export crops and goods (Fortin, 2005). Structural adjustment and privatization often increased marginalization of rural producers. The World Bank's (2003) policy document sees land as a key 'asset' for the rural poor and emphasizes 'productive' use of land, 'efficiency' and profitability. However, most rural people are likely to lose land in an open market situation, particularly if land is used as collateral, since their market position is weak. These policies also have strong gender implications, as some campaigns for women's land rights conflate 'land rights' with individualization of tenure (Manji, 2006). Poorer small farmers, among which number many women, are likely to require robust state backing including access to credit, training, inputs and assistance with marketing to attain (economically) successful outcomes. Such measures are extremely difficult to combine with market-based land schemes.

'Reform' is not simply change. Many changes may ultimately undermine land rights of the poor. The coalition of peasant and small farmer organizations, *Vía Campesina* ['The Peasant Way'], for example, launched a global campaign for agrarian reform in 1999-2000 in defence of agrarian livelihoods (Borras, 2008). A number of rural movements today such as the World Forum on Agrarian Reform (FMRA, 2004) reject the term 'land reform' as applied to export agricultural models accompanied by privatization.

### *Are land and agrarian reforms still of relevance?*

Lastly, are redistributive land and agrarian reforms still of relevance in contemporary circumstances? The majority of the world's population became urban in 2006 (Adam, 2006). Another factor potentially undermining the 'case' for land reform is widespread fragmentation of rural livelihoods under conditions of marketization and globalization. For a variety of reasons including climate changes, the impact of structural adjustment, growth of the 'informal' sector in rural as well as urban areas, and increased migration, agriculture has become a less important aspect of rural livelihood strategies in many parts of the world (Bryceson et al., 2000; Ellis, 2000).

Some argue that the agrarian question has been 'resolved' from the point of view of transnational

capital if not from the viewpoint of the rural land-hungry (Bernstein, 2009). Rural struggles have become fragmented in spatial terms and rural people's efforts to construct livelihoods, not a central concern.

However, agriculture remains of much importance. Approximately 60 percent of the world's population still depends on agriculture as a livelihood source (Lipton, 2005) and one-third of the world's peoples depend directly upon natural resources, including land and trees, for subsistence (Sachs, 2004). Thus the need for agricultural land has not become redundant, even in a situation of livelihood diversification (Jacobs, 2002). Food security has become an increasingly pressing issue in much of the global South, as well as for groups within the global North.

Some movements such as *Vía Campesina* go beyond the term food security and call for a wider goal of food sovereignty. The latter is seen as rooted in smallholder or small farmer-based production systems and within particular food cultures and systems. Food sovereignty movements call for agrarian reform as a reversal of cycles of dispossession, and in the name of people's rights to safe and ecologically sustainable food (McMichael, 2009). McMichael argues that the contemporary 'agrarian question' is closely tied in with that of food production, sustainability and stewardship of land and nature.

The existence of rural land movements attests to the continued need for land reform. The *Movimento sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil and demands for land in Zimbabwe are perhaps the best-known, but movements exist in a number of other regions and countries. For example, in the Philippines, Venezuela and India, social movements seek protection against further encroachment by TNCs or other bodies (see e.g. Borras et al., 2008). The latter include local authorities (China) and foreign governments (Cambodia). The demand for agricultural land still exists, even if intertwined with the complexities of 'making a living' (Francis, 2000) in globalizing contexts

## **Conclusion**

From the discussions above, a number of questions emerge which are relevant to the success or otherwise of land reforms. These include what the purpose of the agrarian reform was seen to be. For instance, was this envisaged as part of a wider social transformation in the countryside? How important were factors such as food security and lessening of differences and inequalities based on class, caste and ethnicity? What supports, if any, were put in place following the reform? How was the reform carried out, and how

complete was it? Such questions tie in with others concerning the 'nature' of the state, whether authoritarian, democratic or some other variant. Relatedly, how tolerant is the state of social movements, including land and rural movements?

This article has emphasized competing definitions of agrarian and land reforms, particularly between redistributionist and market-based models. Many reasons for agrarian reforms exist, encompassing the economic, political and ecological spheres as well as that of human rights. The reasons emphasized tend to vary according to the political aim as well as the scope of agrarian reforms: for instance, is equity or efficiency seen as the main goal? Two of the issues highlighted in the discussion, the optimal size of agricultural (and land reform) units and whether the agricultural unit should belong to a collective or an individual 'household', involve questions of the overall direction of land reforms. The important issue of the optimal size of agricultural units has in practice overlapped with that of how peasants are viewed as political actors.

Issues of social class and of gender concern 'internal' divisions and differentiations but these also affect the direction and outcomes of policy. These remain ongoing and often contentious questions, as does the issue of neoliberal changes in land tenure. Rural movements for land are necessarily focused on external threats. It is hoped that rural movements will also be able to engage with internal divisions: the issue of gender subordination in particular continues to be contentious and is often marginalized. Such issues are crucial to the success of any future agrarian reforms, and to the ability of land reforms to fulfil their democratic purpose. At the moment, however, basic struggles for land – often hidden – continue in many parts of the world.

## Annotated further reading

*Note:* Here I have selected only from books and edited collections, and ones which are general or have wide coverage across continents, due to constraints of space. Several examples of a number of regionally based collections appear in the References section: see e.g. Deere (1987); Ntsebeza and Hall (2007); Thiesenhusen (1995) and Watts (1998).

The majority of publications on land and agrarian reforms, as below, are written by development economists or geographers rather than sociologists. Many articles on agrarian and land reform can be found in the pages of journals such as *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *World Development* and others. SJ

Akram-Lodhi AH, Kay C (eds) (2009) *Peasants and Globalization: Political Economy, Rural Transformation*

and *the Agrarian Question*, Studies in Rural Livelihoods. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. This collection explores different dimensions of the 'agrarian question' as posited in Marxist and neo-Marxist theories. Authors present differing viewpoints on the 'agrarian question': the role of agriculture in accumulation of capital; how capitalist development has impacted upon agriculture; and on the 'fate' of peasantries in advanced capitalism and under globalizing conditions. Some chapters on land reform are included.

Borras S, Edelman M, and Kay C (eds) (2008)

*Transnational Agrarian Movements Confronting Globalization*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

An edited collection which focuses on peasant and rural movements in the context of globalization, privatization of land, the growth of agribusiness and threats to biodiversity. The collection includes chapters on movements for land reform, e.g. in Indonesia, South Africa and Brazil, but also includes discussion of related issues such as struggles against GM crops.

Christodoulou D (1990) *Unpromised Land: Agrarian Reform and Conflict Worldwide*. London: Zed Books. Christodoulou presents a wide-ranging discussion of actors within land reforms, and some of the contradictions involved, focusing on class struggles.

El-Ghonemy MR (1990) *The Political Economy of Rural Poverty: The Case for Land Reform*. London: Routledge.

El-Ghonemy argues the case for land reform as a crucial means for reduction of poverty. He discusses and presents data for a variety of case studies, including China, Kenya, India, Bolivia, Egypt and South Korea.

Ghimire K (ed.) (2001) *Land Reform and Peasant Livelihoods*. London: Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG).

This edited collection concentrates on peasant initiatives, organizations and mobilization; it also includes chapters on the role of the state, and the impact of globalization. A useful and clearly written collection.

Jacobs S (2010) *Gender and Agrarian Reforms*, International Studies of Women and Place. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.

The book provides an overview of gendered dynamics of agrarian reforms across a range of societies. Collective as well as individual household models of land reforms are discussed. Women, particularly wives, have been marginalized within most agrarian reform programmes and issues of gender equity pose challenging questions for agrarian movements.

Sobhan R (1993) *Agrarian Reform and Social Transformation*. London: Zed Books.

A short and readable book that concentrates on the role of agrarian reforms in social transitions; it focuses on types of land and agrarian reforms, with wide geographical coverage.

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**résumé** Cet article rend compte des polémiques sur les réformes foncières et agraires avec, en préambule quelques définitions. Présentant les débats liés au projet politique et aux résultats économiques des réformes (redistributives), il aborde aussi trois problématiques actuelles : d'abord celle liée au genre, aux droits des terres et des réformes foncières, puis celle des 'réformes' néolibérales et du titrement foncier et enfin celle de la pertinence des réformes foncières. L'article conclut que les réformes foncières et agraires restent d'une importance fondamentale pour combattre la pauvreté, pour améliorer la sécurité alimentaire et l'agriculture (de développement) durable, ce tout particulièrement dans un monde façonné par des politiques néolibérales.

**mots-clés** classes paysannes ♦ droits fonciers ♦ genre et droits fonciers ♦ redistribution foncière ♦ réforme agraire ♦ réforme foncière ♦ sécurité alimentaire

**resumen** El presente artículo explora asuntos claves relativos a las reformas de tenencia de la tierra y agraria, comenzando con definiciones de tales procesos. Se analizan los debates en torno a los objetivos políticos y los resultados económicos de las reformas (redistributivas) así como tres asuntos de actualidad: género, derechos relativos a la tenencia de la tierra y reformas agrarias; 'reformas' y derechos de propiedad neoliberales y la relevancia contemporánea de las reformas de la tenencia de la tierra. Concluye que las reformas de tenencia de la tierra y agraria siguen siendo de suma importancia para la reducción de la pobreza, la seguridad alimentaria y la agricultura sustentable, particularmente en un mundo regulado por políticas neoliberales.

**palabras clave** clases rurales ♦ género y tenencia de la tierra ♦ redistribución de la tierra ♦ reforma agraria ♦ reforma de la tenencia de la tierra ♦ seguridad alimentaria ♦ tenencia de la tierra