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Q&A: Land Reform

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Introduction

Land is a sensitive, even sacred, issue in many parts of the world. "I shall never sell the land! Bit by bit, I will dig up the fields and feed the earth itself to the children and when they die I will bury them in the land, and I and my wife and my old father, even he, we will die on the land that has given us birth." This sentiment, expressed by Pearl S. Buck in 1932's **The Good Earth**, remains a strongly held conviction among farmers today. The challenge of fairly distributing land that, for historical or political reasons, has been concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy owners has been around for centuries, and demands for land redistribution echoed across what used to be known as the "Third World" throughout the Cold War. Now, those demands are back, and in their latest form, they are no less challenging from a political, cultural, and economic perspective.

What is land reform?

At its essence, land reform is about redistributing arable land, whether previously collectivized by the state or held by rich farmers. The distribution usually proposes to take from the rich and give to the poor. The process sometimes involves compensation schemes, but in many places, farmers are forced by the government to give up their land at prices the owners regard as unfair. Other times, large-scale landowners are simply evicted without their consent. The goals of land reform are multifold: reducing poverty, expanding rural development, or returning land to its previous owners. Often, land reform is a consequence of post-colonial or post-communist economic and social needs. Other times it is driven more by ethnic and racial divisions, or an interest in manipulating political sentiment, than by any desire to redistribute land equitably. Most rich landowners in southern Africa, for example, are white, while most landless people are black. Zimbabwe's government has pursued land reform with a punitive tone. South Africa, which began its land reforms in earnest only in 2005, has been more cautious, fearing the economic damage that the flight of white farmers could bring.

What is the history of land reform?

Land reform dates back to Roman times and the agrarian laws passed by the Senate around 133 BC, which indirectly led to the undoing of the Roman Republic and presaged the emergence of feudalism. In more modern times, land reform has often followed revolutions in countries like Mexico (1917), Russia (1917), and China (1949). Later, it was coupled with decolonization in the developing world, particularly in African and Arab states. Land reform has also caused instability and even foreign intervention, as in Guatemala in 1954, when the United States helped overthrow an elected government because "its land-reform initiatives were unacceptable to American capital," said Julia Sweig, director of Latin American Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

What are some different types of land reform?

According to Joshua Muldavin, professor of human geography and rural development at Sarah Lawrence College, land-reform movements generally fall under two categories: transformational and populist. Transformational reform, he says, "is not just about breaking up concentrated land holdings or redistributing land but about breaking down the systems that created them, like

feudalism, communism, or capitalism." Populist reform, on the other hand, focuses solely on breaking up large land holdings to redistribute to small holders. "It's a policy shift, not structural," he says. "Governments do it in response to rural unrest, or to undermine revolutionary movements that challenge the state." Often after populist land reforms there is a re-concentration of land holdings, which then requires another round of land redistribution.

Does land reform generally work?

That depends on the region. It has a poor record in places like sub-Saharan Africa, where it has led to lower output and even greater inequality. On the other hand, land reform was successful in Japan, South Korea, and in pockets of India One reason land reforms faltered in Africa is that land was often seized from skilled farmers and handed to unskilled ones. Another problem, Muldavin says, is that the land most often redistributed to the poor is the lowest quality and least arable land available, which leads to lower agricultural output, leaving poor peasants open to criticism for poor farming practices. Further, many of the land holdings are not redistributed to the poor but to political cronies with little farming experience--so called "cell phone farmers." There are a number of other impediments to land reform, including climate, the rising costs of farm production, and the volatility of global agricultural prices.

Where have land reforms recently been enacted?

Asia. Land reform has had some success in Asian countries. In Taiwan, for instance, land was confiscated from absentee landlords and given to small landowners. South Korea, Japan and parts of India enacted reforms that are also viewed as successful by experts. In China, land reform went through a series of stages, the most infamous of which is the harsh collectivization under Mao Zedong in the 1950s which helped create an artificial famine that killed some 30 million people. Muldavin argues that the redistribution of large-scale collective farms - i.e., "de-collectivization" that occurred in China during the late 1970s, had mixed effects. On the one hand, it created "noodle-strip farms"--named because of their narrow size--which initially increased productivity. But it also led to loss of economies of scale and to land degradation. The resulting stagnation in China now threatens the continuation of its current economic boom, experts say. While most peasants still have access to small subsistence plots, Muldavin says a new wave of landlessness in China, approaching 70 million peasants, is a serious challenge to the state's legitimacy. In other South Asian countries like the Philippines, on the other hand, most of the country's arable land remains in the hands of a few politically connected farmers.
Former Soviet Union. In Russia, where a land-reform bill set off fisticuffs on the floor of the Duma in the mid-1990s, private land ownership remains a controversial subject. According to the **Economist**, "it exists in theory, not in practice." Formerly collectivized land has been handed out to around 280,000 families since the early 1990s. Many farmers, however, chose to remain on the Kremlin-run cooperatives because the large size of the farms--roughly 100 acres (versus an average of two acres in China)--meant it was virtually impossible to till without some state assistance, says Roy Prosterman, founder of the University of Washington's Rural Development Institute. Opposition to a land-reform bill in Kazakhstan was so great it led to the ouster of the country's prime minister two years ago.
Africa. On the issue of land reform, "there has not been much to cheer about," said Peter Honey, associate editor of the South Africa-based **Financial Mail**, in an interview with PBS NewsHour. Land reform has occurred in a number of post-colonial countries, including Malawi, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. One of its main purposes was to reverse past land seizures perpetuated against indigenous populations during colonial times. "There was a moral and legal reason to do it, but you don't want to ruin your economy and you want to properly compensate the owners of the land," says Tom McDonald, partner at the law firm Baker & Hostetler and former U.S. ambassador to Zimbabwe. Honey says the most successful cases on the continent involved farms where white farmers were retained to train the new black landowners.
Latin America. Experts say one of the main problems with land reform in Latin America, particularly in places like Brazil, is that only around 20 percent of the workforce remains agricultural. "Most of the population has moved to cities and transplanted the rural problems of poverty to an urban setting," Prosterman says. "Brazilians would have been far better off carrying out a comprehensive land-reform package a generation ago," before the problems of crime, drugs, and poverty crept into their cities. Still, since about 1 percent of Brazil's population owns half of the country's arable land, the issue has continued to bubble to the surface--including last May, when it sparked two weeks of protests. In Venezuela-- where nine of ten Venezuelans live in cities--President Hugo Chavez has announced plans to seize some 3.7 million acres of "idle" land and redistribute it to 100,000 small farmers, or campesinos. Bolivia's newly elected Evo Morales, a leftist, intends to speed up land reform; nine years after its last legislation on the issue, just 17 percent of 107 million hectares have been redistributed.

Why has land reform largely failed in southern Africa?

In places like Zimbabwe, once Africa's bread basket, out of 4,500 farms confiscated by the state in recent years, only a few hundred remain fully operational. "Land reform was basically hijacked as a political weapon [for Robert Mugabe's regime] to hold onto power," McDonald says. "It's unfortunate because what we've seen is the devastation of their economy." Many of the white farmers whose lands were seized were never compensated because the state could not--or would not--come up with the money. Part of the blame lies with the international community, Muldavin says. "There's certainly been a failure on the part of large financial institutions like the World Bank and first-world countries to come through with the level of compensation promised to help buy up these large landholdings for redistribution to landless farmers," he says.

The biggest victims of Zimbabwe's land reforms were black Zimbabweans, 90,000 of whom lost their farming jobs, writes Joshua Kurlantzick in **The New Republic**. "Mugabe has seized nearly 11 million hectares of land, much of which has gone to his political supporters," he writes. Others say the "willing-seller, willing-buyer" program popular among sub-Saharan African countries has not proceeded fast enough, partly because white farmers have artificially inflated the price of their landholdings, making them virtually impossible to purchase. Only 4 percent of South Africa's arable land, for instance, has been redistributed since 1994. In October, the government served its first seizure order to a white farmer; Pretoria says it plans to redistribute 30 percent of commercial farmland by 2015. Malawi only began major land reform in 2002.

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