

Land Reform in Developing Countries: Property Rights and Property Wrongs

Reference: Lipton, Michael. 2009. 'Land Reform in Developing Countries: Property Rights and Property Wrongs'. *Priorities for Development Economics Series*, pp. 456. Oxon: Routledge

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Land reform has always been a contentious subject. Yet to many of the actors involved in water and irrigation, what does and does not constitute land reform remains unclear. For example, (when) is land consolidation considered to be land reform? Michael Lipton's book 'Land Reform in Developing Countries: Property Rights and Property Wrongs' sets the record straight on land reform, explicitly debating what does and does not count as land reform, and reviewing differing experiences from across the globe spanning the past century. The most important points made in this book, in my opinion, are that smaller, redistributed landholdings are most often more productive than larger, unequally distributed landholdings (a fact that is counter-intuitive to the lay person). Second, that land reform needs to be integrated with water reform, or vice versa (a point rarely mentioned by scholars discussing water reforms). Third, that besides decreasing poverty, and increasing productivity, land reform can improve water use efficiency (a consideration conspicuously absent in recent global assessments of the water resource). Fourthly, in rainfed or agriculturally stagnant areas, land reform may be a pre-condition for green revolution growth, because restructured systems of farm ownership or operation are required for the spread of 'green revolution' technologies (irrigation, inputs, credits).

Lipton's half century of research work on the topic and ten years or so of research for this book have culminated in an accessible, comprehensive and passionate guide on land reform.

The five ways in which average income can be raised through increasing poor people's share of land rights (especially via land reform) have been identified. In the introductory chapter, Lipton directly confronts the issue of poverty. He establishes that though GDP growth has helped to reduce the number of people in the world that were 'dollar-poor', and the green revolution made poverty far less than it was, a large part of the sharp acceleration of poverty reduction has been due to land reform. Lipton refers to the (often) disastrous collectivisation of landholdings in the period 1910-80 followed by de-collectivisation mostly since 1977, as 'land reform by detour'. This, he views has affected over a billion people dependent on agriculture.

In the present day, various types of land reforms are being implemented across the globe, from Bolivia to Zimbabwe. Yet because classic land reform involves state intervention, it currently entertains little interest in many international and inter-governmental policy circles. For example, land reform receives no mention in the United Nation's Millennium Declaration of 2000; whereas in the UN's Declaration (2626) of 1970, there is explicit mention that reform of land tenure systems would be undertaken for the promotion of 'social justice and farm efficiency'. Ziai (2011) shows how this omission by the UN relates to a shift in the perception and representation of 'poverty' by powerful players in the international arena, from a theorisation pre-liberalisation of poverty as a relative phenomenon to its modern-day abstraction.

Lipton argues that appropriate land redistribution usually helps liberalisation to be pro-poor, growth-inducing, and politically sustainable or feasible.

In India for example, though sceptics would have one think otherwise, substantial classical, tenancy and other reforms have had considerable effect. In the 1950s, independent India abolished the zamindari system in North India, with over 20 million tenants being brought into direct relationship with the state. However the second phase of land reform remains incomplete due to widespread evasion and avoidance of ceilings legislation. The Indian Planning Commission was self-critical of progress in 2001 and Lipton correctly analysed the link between

classic land reform (land transfers from big to small farms) and tenancy laws in 2006. The successful acceleration of land reform in India, Lipton argues, will depend on showing that smaller more equal farms are not only equitable but also good for productivity.

Taking solely a poverty reduction angle to land reform, e.g. stressing 'land as a basis of livelihood – for subsistence, survival, social justice and human dignity', will unlikely succeed in attempts to garner the political will necessary for land reform. The fairly extensive Indian example further concludes that land reform is possible, though new efforts, politics or circumstances will be required (pages 284-289).

Early in the book, Lipton states that due to water stress, land reforms must be integrated with water reforms, to entail fair and sustainable access to farm water (page 9); a point that is rarely considered in publications discussing recent reform processes around water. For example, the 2007 Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture 'Water for food, water for life' seldom refers to landholding structures or ownership patterns, leave alone land reform in any of its possible forms. The assessment states that rainfed farming is practised on some 80% of the world's cropland. It devotes considerable space to its argument that upgrading such farming systems promises large social, economic and environmental paybacks, particularly in poverty reduction and economic development. Yet, in discussing restricted access to water and low yields, 'political and social issues' caused by 'ineffective institutions and poor governance' are cited as barriers.

Discussing the green revolution with reference to Asia, Lipton cites authors who argued that the 'new agricultural strategy' had an implicit bias against institutional reforms and land reforms in particular, emphasised large-farmer led agricultural development, and saw the problem of land development (output expansion) in isolation from that of labour absorption (employment absorption). Lipton reasserts his standpoint that land reformers have driven the case of land reform as a source of growth and employment too far down the agenda.

In recent years, climate change predictions have led to a renewed interest in irrigation for rainfed agriculture. Where agriculture is stagnant, Lipton argues, land reform may be a condition for green revolution growth not because 'only' some types or sizes of farm will innovate, but because restructured systems of farm ownership or operation are necessary for the spread of 'green revolution' technologies to rainfed (or backward) areas.

Chapter 2 presents an extensive review of the goals of land reform: output, efficiency and growth. Carefully reviewing the evidence, Lipton concludes that redistributive land reform is good for output and growth in many regions, especially those where land is very unequally distributed at the outset. The argument for land reform remains valid today, and more land reform will be required in the future.

Chapters 3-6 explore the main types of land reform, making explicit the assumption that what constitutes land reform for Lipton are those reforms whose goal is 'farmland-based reduction of gross, unearned inequality and hence of poverty'. Finally, Chapter 7 reviews the cases made for the alleged death of land reform. Lipton concludes that the debate about land reform, and land reform itself, are both alive and well – as they should be.

This book is highly recommended for those interested in water and thus land issues; however, the book seldom refers to water, a shame given the inseparability and intractability of these two fundamental resources. Nonetheless the book does allude to several pressing areas in which research needs to be undertaken.

References:

Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture. 2007. 'Water for food, water for life: A comprehensive assessment of water management in agriculture'. London: Earthscan, and Colombo: International Water Management Institute.



Ziai, Aram. 2011. 'The millennium development goals: Back to the future?', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 27-43.

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