

**PROPERTY MATTERS:  
SYNERGIES AND SILENCES BETWEEN  
LAND REFORM RESEARCH &  
DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

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Land market reform is re-emerging as one of the most important instruments of development policy to address rural poverty, inequality, conflict and insecurity. Its effectiveness, however, is a subject of intense scrutiny and debate within academic and policy circles. This article examines the largely neglected work of critical scholars and researchers who challenge many of the underlying assumptions that legitimate market-based land reform. The article argues that the negligible impact that critical research has had on the basic policy orientations and imperatives of major international organizations and donor agencies is primarily a reflection of powerful neo-liberal political and economic ideologies, and their associated institutional arrangements and biases. Policy makers and institutions that ignore or marginalize findings that land privatization frequently impedes rather than enhances land tenure security, food security, inequality and conflict, may be sponsoring development programs that have negative impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable among rural populations.

A stylized fact, and confirmed by a large literature, is that owner operated smallholder farms are desirable from both an equity and an efficiency perspective. Secure individual property rights to land would therefore not only increase the beneficiaries' incentives and provide collateral for further investment but, if all markets were competitive, would automatically lead to socially and economically desirable land market transactions (Deininger and Binswanger 1999, 249).

The World Bank researchers that authored this statement have used a very subtle, albeit common, means of substantiating their argument. Before making any assertions, they lay the ground with a supposed “fact” that is ostensibly “confirmed” by a large (although notably unspecified) literature. Having firmly established the validity of their position before even advancing it, the claims that follow can easily be taken to be unquestionably “true.” Indeed, the causal lines of reasoning and implicit definitions embedded in this analysis seem eminently rational and uncomplicated: clearly, one might think, equity and efficiency are desirable, and if lack of security regarding land tenure owing to the absence of private property prevents these outcomes, then appropriate interventions are supportable and even necessary.

This analysis, however, runs counter to a voluminous literature that points to serious problems underlying the efficacy of market-based land reform.<sup>1</sup> Numerous critical scholars and researchers have argued that the underlying assumptions and casual relationships embedded within this sort of market-centric reasoning—i.e. private property is a prerequisite for investment and development—is either demonstrably wrong, or only circumstantially valid. Consequently, they argue that policy interventions that are based on them may fail to achieve expected results, or worse, function to amplify the very problems—such as inequality, food insecurity, and poverty— they intend to address (Lund 2002, 2).

The existence of this critical literature, however, rarely influences the agendas or policy orientations of the main proponents of market-based land reform. The authors of

the statement above and, more generally, the influential institution that they represent, repeatedly support market-based land reforms through the selective use of research in order to support their claim that rural inequality, insecurity and conflict are partially the result of a lack of individual property rights.<sup>2</sup> In general, the concerns raised by those who fundamentally oppose this assumption and the perception that it is possible to predict systematic relationships between various forms of property arrangements and economic, social, and political behaviors, are marginalized, dismissed, scarcely addressed or co-opted and transformed.

This article argues that approaches to address the real and growing problems of land concentration and poverty through the imposition of private entitlements and market-assisted land reforms ignore substantial research findings that indicate that investment is possible even when tenure is secured through alternative methods of titling, including leases, permits and customary rights. Within the pro-market literature, this alternative perspective is either systematically ignored, or given only a token acknowledgement. This leads to the conclusion that the negligible impact that critical research has had on the basic policy orientations and imperatives of major international organizations and donor agencies is primarily a reflection of powerful neo-liberal political and economic ideologies, and their associated institutional arrangements and biases.

This study is divided into five main sections: Section I lays the groundwork with a brief discussion of the emergence of land reform as a priority for national and, later, international decision makers. Section II presents and discusses several of the basic arguments used to justify the implementation of neo-liberal land reform policies and

surveys a sample of the vast literature that challenges these assumptions. Section III draws on the same literature, which critically evaluates the outcomes of market-based land reform strategies based on the experiences of selected countries and disadvantaged groups. Section IV explores the evident gulf between critical researchers and policy makers in the field of land reform policy and practice and suggests why it exists. Section V sums up the analysis.

## **I. CHANGING ORIENTATIONS IN THE THEORY & PRACTICE OF LAND REFORM**

In most countries, the causes of increasing competition and contestation over land have been similar. In most of Africa, for example, Berry argues, “rapid population growth, environmental degradation, and slow rates of economic development that leave many people dependent on small-scale farming, livestock raising and foraging have combined to transform the continent from a land of abundance in the first half of the twentieth century to one of increasing land scarcity by its end” (Berry 2002, 2). Land scarcity, however, has not been the only source of conflict. The effects of social, political and environmental crises, together with the effects of unstable world markets, inappropriate development policies, corruption, and in some cases, open warfare, combine to render life extremely insecure. Under these conditions, Berry argues:

Land [becomes] increasingly attractive as a source of relative stability in a volatile and threatening world. By the late twentieth century, many Africans appeared to agree with the Kenyan farmer who explained to a foreign observer ‘a piece of land never shrinks’ (Berry 2002, 3).

Given these circumstances, there has long been enormous pressure placed on governments to transform land ownership structures to reflect democratic principles of

equitable access and to redress the histories of dispossession and exclusion suffered by the poor during the colonial period. Land reform has, as such, been regarded as a key part of national development strategies that aim to reduce rural disparities, improve agricultural productivity and food security, and increase the incomes and the overall welfare of rural populations.<sup>3</sup> The forms it has taken and the motivations behind its promotion have, however, varied both in terms of time and place.

In the period immediately following independence, state-led redistributive land reform was an important social priority for many developing countries. El-Ghonemy situates this period roughly from the 1940s to the early 1980s, and calls it “the golden age of genuine land reform,” when reforms were enacted primarily in response to “a deep dissatisfaction with the abject poverty, gross inequalities and social instability resulting from colonial policies.” He also posits that, although the scope, pace and nature of reforms varied between countries, they shared in a broad aim: “a rapid reduction in poverty and inequalities, combined with emancipation of the peasants from the erstwhile political power of landlords and the monopolies of the latter in land and labour markets” (El-Ghonemy 1999, 1).

The commitments of governments to equitable distribution of land through “redistributions with speed” and to systematic monitoring of progress against poverty were relatively short-lived, or have at least been supplanted by another, arguably more powerful regime. There has been an appreciable shift away from government-implemented redistributive land reform toward reliance on the formal credit market and on market-based, freely negotiated property transfer. Known as “land market reform,”

this has become the dominant policy approach of most developing countries since the late 1980s.

The emergence of market-based reform as the dominant policy approach of developing countries was intimately associated with the advent of economic reform policies or structural adjustment packages by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Faced with the stark realities of large financial shortages and deficits that were normally filled in the form of loans and aid from foreign countries and development agencies, developing country governments were more or less obliged to accept the conditions and policy frameworks of those that had the willingness and ability to support their development. Following the prolonged economic crises of the 1970s, Western creditors wanted to recover debts and refused to make new loans to indebted countries unless they signed agreements with the IMF and World Bank for debt recovery linked with time-limited market liberalization. Market-based land reform (usually as part of a strategy for agricultural liberalization or rural development) was often a precondition to qualify for loans and aid from international funding agencies (Karumbidza 2002; El-Ghonemy 1999).

As such, since the late 1980s, major international agencies (e.g. the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization, International Labor Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development) and bilateral aid agencies (e.g. USAID, Canadian International Development Agency, Department for International Development, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit), have emerged as sponsors of land tenure reforms in developing countries. As a major source of financing for many developing countries, they indirectly wield a lot of influence in designing the macroeconomic

policies of recipient countries. Given the heavy dependence of many developing nations on primary agricultural commodities for large percentages of their GDP (e.g. sugar, coffee, cocoa, tea, fruit), and the vulnerabilities of rural producers to price fluctuations on international markets, a significant and growing amount of attention is being directed at developing strategies for rural/agrarian reform.<sup>4</sup> Policies for land market reform enter here, within “the context of evolving and credible government strategies for poverty alleviation,” and “an appropriate agrarian reform strategy” (World Bank 1993, 11). The particular mechanisms through which market-based land reforms would bring about poverty reduction is less clearly spelled out. This may be because, as El-Ghonemy implies below, land market reform in practice delays radical campaigns for redistributive reform in favor of more diffuse goals:

Although advocates of [market-based land reform] express concern over increasing poverty, they anticipate its eventual reduction by a sustained all-round rise in average real income per head. Equitable distribution of growth benefits is not a clear development objective. Seeing land-market reform as an end in itself represents a set-back in the progress made since the 1950s both in development thinking and in the realization of equitable rural development (El-Ghonemy 1999, 2).

## **II. QUESTIONING BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MARKET-BASED LAND REFORM**

It is worthwhile to look at some of the claims made by proponents of land-market reform, especially with regards to its supposed capacity to reduce rural poverty and inequality. It is not often clear that land reform will categorically result in desirable outcomes for the poor. Despite significant evidence that this is the case, major international donors continue to press forward with this controversial agenda.

On 18 November 2002, the World Bank released a new rural development strategy, *Reaching the Rural Poor*, which will “guide the World Bank's future rural lending operations.” Bank lending for agriculture for the 2003 and 2004 fiscal years is

projected to rise by 20 percent yearly under the new strategy, marking a net increase of about \$400 million. Although the headline for the release was “New Strategy Advocates Removal of Subsidies,” the majority of the report focuses on the need for developing countries to:

...end any discriminatory, open and hidden taxation of agriculture, complete the reform in agricultural marketing, increase budget allocations to rural space, decentralize the provision of rural services, support rural organizations, and *promote land reform as a means to increase the assets of the rural poor* (World Bank 2002, emphasis added).

Although the news release repeatedly emphasized that poverty reduction is the main purpose of rural development, there is no acknowledgment that an open, market-dominated international economy often increases inequalities and can intensify poverty. Instead, its assumption is that globalization already works for the poor, and that the role of international assistance is to facilitate the fuller integration of the world’s poorest countries into the global economy. The Bank has been widely criticized for its excessively technological orientation and undifferentiated market-based approaches to addressing the complex realities of rural inequality. This strategy, which repeatedly “reconfirms that agriculture is the main source of overall economic growth and poverty reduction in many poor countries,” does not waver from the Bank’s traditional course, and unquestioningly equates land reform with rural poverty reduction.

A very simplistic causal connection often made between private property, “tenure security,” and investment is common amongst proponents of market-based land reform.

As Lund puts it, the reasoning involved, in a simplified form, often looks like this:

One of the reasons why agricultural development is so unsatisfactory in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of productivity and sustainability is that there is not investment; this in turn is due to the lack of tenure, which, in turn, is due to the absence of private property (Lund 2002, 1).

A more subtly articulated version of the same statement is found, again, in Deininger and Binswanger’s article, where they assert:



When the community rather than the individual owns the land... individuals have very secure and normally inheritable rights to land even after a period of absence, but they do not have *permanent property rights* to a specific plot, *a limitation that may reduce investment incentives* (Deininger and Binswanger 1999, 257, emphasis added).

There are several implicit, problematic assumptions in this statement. The first is that in tenure systems that are not formalized or privatized (often referred to as “customary tenure” or “common property” arrangements), community members have “very secure” rights to land. This paints a false image of homogenous, egalitarian community arrangements. On the contrary, as many scholars and researchers have argued, people’s access to land and other natural resources typically depends on their membership and status within a particular group wielding political power. Membership in a village or “community,” therefore, does not guarantee access to land. Moreover, rights and entitlements to land and other resources are constantly being negotiated and transformed as alliances within communities change, and in response to new external demands and pressures (e.g. agricultural development, male migration, or gender-based divisions of labor). This reality challenges the notion that “tenure security,” as implied above, can ever exist, especially for marginal populations.

The next assumption—that “private property rights” will offer tenure security to marginal groups and increase the likelihood that they will invest in land—is also problematic. Many critical scholars and researchers have challenged this causal argument, which has been central to the case made by policy makers in favor of market-based land reforms. They argue that the supposed causal links between private property, tenure security and investment are far from conclusive.

During their work in Ghana, Kenya and Rwanda, for example, Migot-Adholla et al. found that agricultural productivity did not vary under private land rights

arrangements and suggested that factors other than land tenure are more constraining for agricultural development and food security in rural areas. They reported that the fields they studied were generally acquired through non-market channels such as inheritance, gifts, and government allocation, and that the land was held under a variety of tenure forms ranging from temporary use-rights to permanent use-rights. They found, in general, that people were more inclined to “invest” in their land if their use-rights could be handed down to their children, than if use-rights could not be transferred. However, they also emphasized that “there is no difference in the incidence of land improvements between ‘preferential transfer’ (i.e. rights to transfer to kin) and ‘complete transfer’ (i.e. the right to sell to whoever they wanted—full alienation) land.” Further, they found “no relationship between land rights and plot yields in Kenya and Ghana,” and that “the mode of acquisition had no effect on plot yields.” In fact, in another study of Rwanda, the same authors found that “‘short-term use rights’ parcels were more productive than parcels in all other land rights categories” (Migot-Adholla, et al. 1993, 281-282; cited in Lund 2002, 14).

The tenure systems of most developing countries (especially those of Africa and South Asia) are characterized by the existence of multiple tenures—land may be used by several people in different ways for different purposes (e.g. farming, grazing, and collecting fuel-wood and water). Sjaastad and Bromley indicate, the problem with the privatization = tenure security = investment and increased production equation is that, although implying exclusionary rights through titling will increase tenure security for the excluding party, the opposite must be the result for the excluded (Sjaastad and Bromley 1997, 2000). Thus, as Lund puts it, “when we talk about increasing tenure security, there

is most of the time a corresponding aspect of increasing tenure insecurity as well, something that has a much less benign ring to it” (Lund 2002, 16).

It is not insignificant that land privatization has been cited as one of the main factors leading to the degradation of common property resources (CPRs) and loss of access to them, particularly by the poor. Beck and Nesmith have estimated that CPRs currently contribute \$5 billion per year to the incomes of poor rural households in India, or about 12 percent of their incomes. They posit that figures from West Africa suggest a similar scale of contribution to the incomes of the poor by CPRs (Beck and Nesmith 2001; Beck 2000). Given the evidence that CPRs play an important redistributive role in rural societies (as they are of greater importance and relevance to the poor than the non-poor), and the high dependence of poor people, particularly women, on them for supplementary incomes and subsistence, the contemporary “enclosure of the commons” has significant adverse consequences for the poor.

In a well-known case study in the Gambia, Carney found that the commercialization of wetlands under various development project initiatives resulted in the shift from women having rights to cultivate and individually control the products of their labor on communally owned lands, toward male rights of control over the products of women’s labor on those lands (Carney 1993). In this case, privatization of “common” resources worsened the relative position of women within the household. This has led many scholars and researchers to contend that, before any development intervention or policy is chosen, close attention needs to be paid to the ways in which community management systems organize access to land and other resources. Privatization of land

resources, as will be discussed further below, may not be a solution to rural poverty if, by definition, it means that the poor will have to suffer new exclusions and limited access.

### **III. 'POVERTY REDUCTION' OR CONCENTRATION OF PROPERTY & WEALTH?**

These realities problematize the popular, often publicized announcements by international agencies that the primary purpose of land reform is poverty reduction. A more realistic view of its role and implications, which are markedly unfavorable to the poor, materialize when seen within the context of the economic adjustment programs through which they are being implemented. In a recent article, Ghimire comments:

In recent years, the World Bank, with its policies of promoting agricultural liberalization and private property rights, has sought to implement market-assisted reforms in a number of developing countries... (I)t is highly questionable whether there would be sufficient land on the market on a willing seller, willing buyer basis at an affordable price for the bulk of the land-aspiring rural poor to be able to access land. In fact, land markets are highly unfavorable to the poor, while providing further economic opportunities for speculators to grab more land (Ghimire 2002, 263).

Many scholars and researchers have set out to examine prevailing land patterns in developing countries. These investigations generally conclude that rural landscapes in developing countries are characterized by highly inequitable social structures, or what many have called “bi-modal agrarian systems,” in which expansive commercial estates control vast tracts of fertile land while large numbers of landless or nearly landless people cultivate little or no land. Where measurable evidence is available, indications suggest that polarization is increasing and that new inequalities and conflicts are emerging.<sup>5</sup> Many studies have indicated, as Ghimire does above, that market-based land reforms have tended to concentrate land holdings amongst the already powerful rural elite.

According to Moyo, in Zimbabwe, land market reform programs “tend to reconcentrate land among [a] new black and foreign elite.” She also remarks that donor

funded NGOs have emerged as large owners of land, “in the guise of promoting sustainable land use, environmental protection and tourism” and “in the process alienating large tracts of land” (Moyo 2000, 54).

El-Ghonemy observes that in Uganda, an economic policy reform toward export-led growth has “facilitated shifting land use from grazing and growing food (cassava and millet) to commercial ranching managed by urban land buyers who have kinship relations with influential policy makers.” The historical roots of the present food crisis in Malawi can in part be traced to land and agrarian reform strategies. Between 1986 and 1990, the area of customary land that was privatized doubled. Land buyers converted the production of food crops into Burley tobacco, and former landholders became wage workers and net buyers of food. Tobacco production for export has grown dramatically in recent years, while food production has fallen substantially (El-Ghonemy 1999, 18).

The case of Kenya is particularly interesting. Its post-1980 market-based land reform strategy involved the privatization of customary land tenure, the consolidation of fragmented holdings, and the promotion of land-title transfers through the market. These changes, combined with reduced social spending and the deteriorating living conditions of low-income groups after the introduction of economic reforms, have contributed to extreme land concentration, a high incidence of rural poverty (55 percent), rising landlessness, and a 0.77 Gini index (El-Ghonemy 1999, 24). As El-Ghonemy writes:

The irony of this poor and overwhelmingly rural country’s post-1980 land policy is that it has resulted in the very problems it intended to redress: the vast inequality in the distribution of land and income, and persistent poverty in rural areas (El-Ghonemy 1999, 15).

The promises of land market reform for the poor that are often touted by influential international organizations and donors may be limited. Individuals and social groups have different abilities to participate in the market. The capacity of poor people to

obtain the necessary credit, important information on pricing, as well as the new skills and inputs needed to diversify production and income sources is limited when compared with rural elites and large-scale farmers. It is estimated, for example, that the entire household of an average agricultural worker in Kenya would have to accumulate earnings without any expenditure on living costs for a full nine years to purchase a single acre of land (El-Ghonemy 1999, 24).

Another problem for which market-based land reform policies are widely criticized is a general lack of consideration for the impacts on rural women, who are often the ones who depend most on customarily sanctioned access to common land resources. In his study of the demise of CPRs in West Bengal in relation to land tenure and agricultural reforms, Beck notes that the tendency towards cash crop production often has some unintended side effects for women. High-yielding variety crops, for example, “do not provide anywhere near the amount of grains for gleaning as traditional varieties” (Beck 2000, 8). They may, as such, not only be denied access to customary entitlements, but where they still exist, access may become more difficult and less fruitful. Furthermore, within those households that do gain titles to land, men are typically the formal owners. As the usual dominant authority in the family structure, they also pool and manage labor use and income. The reallocation of labor for the production of cash/export crops often comes at the disadvantage of women (Besha 1994).

Given these difficult realities, market-based land reform may not in fact be the simple, targeted solution for poverty, growth and the “reduction of unequal patterns of distribution” (FAO 1995) it is often proclaimed to be by its proponents. Indeed, the studies presented here, which expose some of the basic assumptions underpinning the

justifications for market-based land reforms on economic and social justice grounds, as well as the particular experiences of countries implementing them, are “not only unsatisfactory but alarming, both in terms of worsening food security and inequality” (El-Ghonemy 1999, 20).

Yet, despite the underlying problems, faulty assumptions, misconceptions and severe miscalculations of outcomes that have been clearly spelled out in many studies, the reforms remain an important aspect of rural development plans and priorities. This has been an enormous source of frustration for many scholars and researchers, many of whom make a concerted effort to bring their findings to policy makers.

#### **IV. NEGLECTED RESEARCH: TECHNICAL DEFICIENCY OR FREE-MARKET IDEOLOGY?**

This article argues that the negligible impact that critical research has had on the basic policy orientations and imperatives of major international organizations and donor agencies is primarily a reflection of powerful neo-liberal political and economic ideologies, and their associated institutional arrangements and biases.

Regarding his work on the impacts of land and agrarian reform policies on the rural poor in West Bengal, Beck writes:

We have tried to take our findings directly to decision makers in West Bengal and Bangladesh and have organized workshops for researchers, practitioners and decision-makers... on poor people and their environment in South Asia. Attempts to take research findings directly to decision-makers have not left me optimistic. The reaction is partly that CPRs are part of a rural setting that is disappearing as agriculture is transformed and rural industrialization is advancing. Perhaps if it was 10% of decision makers' salaries that was about to disappear they might be more interested (2000, 10).

In this case, the lack of attention paid to Beck's work was not a reflection of a lack of effort to expose decision makers to his findings. Interestingly, Beck himself attributes the

lack of response to a perception by decision makers that the demise of CPRs and rural people's access to them is inevitable in the face of agricultural reforms supporting mechanization for export production. This is echoed also by El-Ghonemy, who expresses "serious doubt" about the utility of advancing suggestions for improving land market reform, "because market-based reforms of land tenure arrangements are held in bondage by the present economic reforms and foreign debt crisis" (1999, 25). Both authors, thus, directly and indirectly attribute the lack of response by decision makers to their work to overriding macro-political and economic structures and the assumptions underlying them.

As discussed above, the privileging of land market reform as a means of "rural development and poverty reduction" is intimately associated with the assumptions underlying neo-liberal economic theories of growth and poverty. Put simply, the basic premise is that achievement of economic growth eventually reduces or alleviates poverty, and the best way to attain economic growth is to seek integration into the global capitalist economy. Advocates of land market reforms, thus, accord priority to economic efficiency in the market-determined allocation of resources in order to realize export-led growth. Towards this end, market-based land reform policy supports the "freedom of the producer and of capitalists in the accumulation of land and income, irrespective of adverse distributional consequences and effects on the well-being of the poor" (El-Ghonemy 1999, 2).

One would, however, likely never come across a policy prescription justified in these terms. On the contrary, as we have seen, poverty reduction is usually the main reason cited for land market reform. But it is not something that is anticipated to be the direct result of the land reform *per se*. Rather, land market reform is designed, in



association with a host of other rural and agricultural intervention strategies, primarily as a mechanism for realizing increased agricultural growth. In this formulation, it is anticipated that poverty reduction will be the natural outcome of an expected, all-round rise in real income per head.

Given strong neo-liberal institutional biases amongst the main organizations advocating, indeed requiring rural, agricultural and land reform in developing countries, the voices of those who do not share the same expectations and/or approaches are easily disregarded. According to Ghimire, even those inside these organizations with more nuanced understandings of the effects of land market reform on the poor have “been increasingly sidelined” (2002, 264).

The research work that is frequently used to legitimize and support land market interventions often comes from within international development organizations. Specific project experiences are often considered to provide valuable knowledge that can be used to support future interventions. Given the limited public circulation of these findings, however, many researchers are skeptical that they represent objective accounts of the effects of given interventions. Furthermore, the structure, timing and duration of project interventions often impede meaningful analyses of long-term and macro-level effects. In other words, “in concentrating efforts on so-called success stories and selective local knowledge, politically touchy issues, project failures and contradictory processes are all but overlooked” (Ghimire 2002, 266).

Proponents of market-based land reform do have some empirical data in developing countries to back up some common claims about the value of individualized property rights regimes, but from the perspective of many researchers it is often

inconclusive or flawed. On occasion, research can be selectively interpreted or used to justify controversial policy options or decisions.

For example, a recent review of research by the World Bank endeavored to pull together empirical evidence for the idea that the institutionalization of individualized property rights through tradable titles will increase productivity and, by implication, wealth in rural areas (Deininger 1999). The article cites a study from a region in Ghana where there is some evidence that productivity gains in agriculture were associated with property titling. Of the three sites that were studied in the Ghana case study, however, only the one that clearly supported property titling was referred to in the World Bank report. The author of the same review also attributes the massive productivity gains in China that took place after reforms allowed for individual production on collective land as evidence for the virtues of tradable titling systems (Deininger 1999). This view, however, is not universally held. As Ellsworth points out, some scholars of China suggest that “equally impressive gains in productivity occurred when China first went communist and collectivized its assets, a fact that suggests that it might be the size and locally-perceived desirability of the institutional change that influences such productivity gains” (Ellsworth 2002, 12; Sincular 2000).

## **V. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The claim that there is “broad agreement” that secure individual land rights will “increase incentives to undertake productivity enhancing land-related investments” (Deininger 1999, 35) may be exaggerated. Clearly, the ideological functions and values inherent in the selection, interpretation and application of research have consequences beyond that

which is examined. As Lund puts it, research findings are “used to justify interventions, privilege certain institutions and favor certain groups, and they are therefore often peddled by specific stakeholders” (2002, 1).

As has been shown, extensive research problematizes some of the basic assumptions that justify land market reform as a strategy to increase income, food security, and distributional equality. On the contrary, it has been shown that market-based land reform often results in the increasing concentration of land holding patterns and the further exclusion of poor people from common property resources. This literature, however, has been marginalized, appropriated and transformed, or ignored because of powerful neo-liberal political and economic ideologies that underwrite the rural development agendas of influential international organizations and developing country elites. Within these powerful institutions, there is often no acknowledgement of the fact that an open, market-dominated international economy often increases and intensifies poverty.

The case is thus clear that policy makers and institutions that ignore or marginalize findings that are critical of land privatization may be sponsoring development programs that have disproportionately negative impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable among rural populations. Given current dismal tendencies to disregard these problems when it comes to the formal implementation of programs or the development of economic reform packages, the hope for dramatic change in the course of rural development seems slim.

This does not, however, undermine the legitimacy, crucial importance or value of critical research and advocacy. The question of what constitutes “development” is

arguably constantly changing. While some of the most powerful international organizations currently advocate that unrestrained capitalist development is the solution to all problems, other voices with equal legitimacy suggest that development must have more to do with equality, redistribution of wealth and power and the reduction of poverty. While the views of the latter often have little direct impact, there are conjunctures that permit the possibility of incremental reforms that will be of value to the oppressed and impoverished.<sup>6</sup> As such, if it is true that the strength of an ideology depends on the extent to which people accept its legitimizing discourses, it behooves us to remain cognizant of its mechanisms and contradictions. If modernization through the marketization of resources is designated as a supra-historical inevitability, one is in danger of losing sight of the fact that there *are* alternative visions and realities that are in danger of being obscured.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The market orientation of land tenure arrangements typically involves the freezing or slowing down of redistributive policies, and the promotion of property transfer between willing buyers and sellers at market prices. Donors like the World Bank tend to advocate for private tenure/individual titling, which they argue will have the most direct effect on productivity and farm investment. This assumption is based on contentious, highly debated theories like those propounded in the “property rights school,” which draw causal linkages between formal, legally mandated ownership arrangements and investment. See J. Bruce, et al. (1994), and L. Ellsworth (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Clearly, there are dissenting views about the effectiveness of market-based land reforms in developing countries within these institutions. It is also worth noting that efforts have been made to engage critical voices on the subject of land policy. In the summer of 2002, for example, the World Bank’s Land Policy and Administration Group held regional consultations on land policy in developing countries that provided a platform for the expression of diverse opinions about the policies best suited to particular contexts. It is the position of this article, however, that (as yet) the policies ultimately put forward do not reflect the diversity of opinions reflected in public consultations and internal dissent.

<sup>3</sup> Land reform is defined here as major institutionalized measures to redistribute land in order to transform rural property relations and to increase access to land by the rural poor.

<sup>4</sup> Agricultural and rural growth is essential to income growth in most low-income countries. In Uganda, for example, it is estimated that the livelihoods of roughly one-quarter (5.5 million) of the total population are directly or indirectly dependent on coffee sales for an estimated 70% of total household income. More broadly, poverty in Uganda continues to be a rural phenomenon, with 96% of the poor living in rural areas, 84% of whom depend on incomes from agriculture. See Commodity Risk Management Group (2002).

<sup>5</sup> A small sampling of these studies includes: K.B. Ghimire (2002); H. Bernstein (1996); K.B. Ghimire, ed. (2001); G.S. Uddin & S. Akther (1997); and R. Besha (1994).

<sup>6</sup> This could be understood in terms of Gramsci’s notion of the need for a subtle “war of position.” Rather than smashing the state in a military insurrection led by a vanguard elite, Gramsci calls for the “mass party to engage in widespread and protracted intellectual militancy across the whole of civil society.” In other words, brute force, or domination, is not enough—the revolutionary class must win the *consent* of other classes to achieve radical transformation.

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