

## A theoretical overview of land reform

### Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to examine the objectives of land reform in the underdeveloped countries, and it argues that land reform tends to have socio-economic and political implications for the power relationships between various social groups in society. And, in an attempt to elaborate this argument, I see that the success of any land reform depends on the intended beneficiaries and on their positions to influence political decisions. This paper ends with the major objective of land reform is to make peasants masters of their own concerns and responsible for their destiny.

**KABACHE Rabah**  
Institut de Sociologie  
Université Mentouri,  
Constantine, Algérie

### ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معالجة أهداف الإصلاح الزراعي في الدول النامية، وترى أن أغلب الإصلاحات الزراعية قائمة على علاقات القوة السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية بين جماعات مختلفة في المجتمع. ولهذا فإن نجاح أي إصلاح زراعي يتوقف أساساً على المستفيدين منه وعلى قدرتهم في مدى التأثير على القرارات السياسية، بحيث يصبح الهدف الحقيقي من الإصلاح الزراعي هو جعل الفلاح يتحكم في مسار عمله ويوجهه، بدلاً من تسييره بواسطة هياكل بيروقراطية لا تمثل مصالحه وبعيدة عن واقعه.

The majority of underdeveloped countries are agrarian societies. This means that their economic activities, social institutions and political power are associated with the use and exploitation of land as a productive source.

Actually, it has become increasingly apparent that colonialism left a legacy of unbalanced and tightly dependent economies. And among the problems facing the underdeveloped countries rural development has received increasing attention from the national leaders of these countries since the second world war. Consequently, a variety of rural strategies has been tried in these countries in order to achieve various objectives.

In recent, most underdeveloped countries have come to realise that the development policies of the past as adopted by capitalists are in appropriate and irrelevant to their needs. They have also come to realise that a development policy tied primarily to economic growth will not by itself solve problems of unemployment and income distribution or improve the conditions of the rural population.

Over the past decades countries that adopted socialism have shifted their dominant concern from promoting rapid growth in gross national product to

ways of expanding economic participation, reducing disparities in income and wealth and seeking to expand employment opportunities in order to meet basic human needs for the poor groups in society. This shift might have two major consequences: undeveloped countries have come to realise that policies of development pursued after world war II did very little to reduce the dependence of these countries on industrialised countries. And, secondly they also did very little to spread the benefit of growth by improving the conditions of the poor. And as a consequence of internal, social and political pressures of the prevailing social injustice in society national leaders came to realise that political stability could not be achieved and maintained by relying merely on the support of a small wealthy landlord class. They came to recognise the need to reorganise the rural economy to avoid a peasant revolution and gain the support of the majority of the population. Governments became very anxious about peasants' revolution, and in their search for peaceful solutions, they introduced agrarian reforms. As one writer on development puts it "No government can hope to satisfy the demands of rioting students. But a government can, if it is so minded, significantly affect the conditions of the countryside so as to reduce the propensity of peasants' revolt" (quoted in Halliday 1979, p 135). That is to say, on the whole land reform is not so much the result of good will but rather has "resulted more from coup d'état and populist revolutions than piecemeal planning" (Mehmet, 1979, p 235).

At this stage, it is necessary to discuss the main objectives of land reform. (The term of land reform and agrarian reform are used interchangeably). Land reform merits special attention, since it is widely accepted, in the literature, as a measure for reducing poverty, redistributing wealth and promoting economic development in the underdeveloped countries. It is very essential for social justice because the well-being of the rural population depends greatly on agriculture. The basic problems facing poor people in underdeveloped countries are that poor farmers lack access to public and private institutions that have the resources needed to help poor farmers to increase productivity and thereby incomes if other conditions are favourable such as taxes, access to market, etc.

Frequently, land tends to be owned by a few, often absent, big landholdings. If land reform is aimed at the redistribution of property rights in land for the benefit of the landless people and small farmers, the social and economic power of the landlords is likely to be undermined. For instance in Latin America "Landholding and the style of life which accompanies it not only confer social status and prestige but, through traditional paternalistic social relations and physical coercion, confer the power to control the political behaviour of the peasants, who are thus little more than pawns in the hands of the large landholders. Possessing wealth, status and captive votes of the rural areas, the land owners are able to influence executives, legislators, bureaucracies, and judiciaries" (Petras and La Porte, 1973, pp 232 - 33). Moreover land lords in underdeveloped countries do not enhance the economic development of their countries because they mostly export their earnings to the industrialised world abroad and invest in commerce and real estate, etc... Petras and La Porte argue that unlike what happened in Europe, The Soviet Union, Japan and even The United States in which all coercion of the agricultural population to extract the economic surplus was followed by rapid industrialisation, « ... intense exploitation of the peasantry and rural labour force has

been commonplace throughout Latin America during the better part of four centuries, the landowners have not utilised the economic surplus to industrialise society »(1973, p 233).

Before going any further I should define what I mean by land reform. I will adopt Mehmet's broad definition «an integrated programme of measures designed to eliminate obstacles to economic and social development arising out of defect in the agricultural structure «(1978 , p235). This is to say land reform necessitates a whole range of policies dealing not only with redistribution of property rights in land but also with other measures including improvement in tenancy conditions, credit and marketing.

It should be noted that land reforms tend to have far - reaching socio-economic and political implications for the power relationships between various social groups in society because landownership constitutes a source of political and economic power involving a profound conflict of interests between those who favour land reform for the majority of the population and those who stand against it. Thus, I share the view of Corner and Felstechausen that any policy of planned reform «is not initiated and carried forward solely on the basis of rational and deliberate arguments of planners and analysts. Battles for reform are fought in political arenas by representatives of differing vested interest «(quoted in Ollawa , 1977 , p.420). Thus, It is not likely that a government dominated by landlords would actually vote itself out of power and introduce major changes in economic and political power for the benefit of the landless people and poor farmers, unless it was forced to do so. Therefore a genuine land reform program that aimed at transformation of the agrarian structures and transfer of economic and political power for the benefit of the pauperised people ought to be fought by the landless people and poor peasants to gain power and decide for themselves.

Generally, land reform is a direct government controlled programme and the success of such reform depends very much on the intended beneficiaries and how strong their position is to influence political decisions without allowing governments to have a free hand to manipulate it as they want. An example is what happened in China. China's land reform during the late 1950 was carried out with significant peasant participation in the planning stage and its implementation. This reform not only distributed the productive assets by which the peasantry could economically sustain itself but more importantly it organised rural people to break the hold of the landlord gentry class. Thus, Gurley argues «The Chinese land reform did not give land to the poor peasants. It encouraged them to organise themselves to take it, and , in the process to crush their former oppressors. This was the prerequisite for later social development in the countryside, for, without it, the old class structure and wealth ownership patterns would have been generated by the persistence of old attitudes and of institutions favourable to the rich » (1974, p.389).

The promulgation of a land reform program is not enough ; No matter how sweeping or revolutionary it is, unless it is accompanied by the creation of a new agrarian structure to support the newly established land tenure system, such as agricultural credit, technical assistance, investment and a marketing system,; etc., It will have little effect. All these measures must be transformed to serve the new Landholding

system and not to serve as instruments to control the intended beneficiaries : In the latter case it would merely facilitate the extraction of the surplus and consider the peasantry wage labourers.

### **THE OBJECTIVES OF LAND REFORM**

The main objectives of land reform are increased production of food grains and marketable surpluses for urban markets and/or exports, redistribution of land to small farmers and landless people so that they can feed themselves and it possible produce a surplus. It is a condition for social change by abolishing inequality in rights and in income, there by reducing inequalities of access to the political system. It follows that the basic aims of land reforms are two fold : economic, and socio-political. These aims are interrelated and complementary. In the first place the economic argument for land reform is generally concerned with increased production which could be expected from underdeveloped countries if credit and market were more easily accessible to all producers. And if other conditions such as prices are favourable high production may lead to increased rural purchased power. That can enlarge domestic markets for manufactured goods; provide manufactured goods to either absorb domestic demand for foodstuffs, or increase foreign exchange necessary for the development of industry (Dorner, 1972, pp 16-17) such economic goals tend to be shared by most land reform schemes. The socio-political objective stresses the balance of political power in considering to inequalities that derive from the political and economic control exercised by powerful landlords and their allies in urban areas : the achievement of a more just income distribution through eliminating major inequalities due to differential control over the means of production.

Methods, magnitudes and priority of desirable action to differ from one land reform experiment to another according to their objectives.

A general distinction is to be made between land reforms occurring with a capitalist and those within a socialist frame work.

In the capitalist context land reform seeks to promote gradual changes in the land tenure system in order to create new forms of economic institutions within the established legal frame work and without radically altering the economic, political and social institutions which enhance the domination of the few who own land at the expense of the many who work it. Its ultimate aim is to be met through technical innovation. This type of reform is based upon a modernisation view of change because it stresses the importance of diffusing skills and resources to the rural sector.

Under socialism land reform usually involves a radical transformation of the land tenure system and property relations, distribution of economic and political power for the benefit of the landless and poor farmers, and the establishment of more radical agrarian structures. This type often adopt more sweeping programmes leading to a collectivist system of economic organisation : either co-operatives or some state farming system which results, as Lehmann argues in strong state control of circulation of commodities and investment (1974, p.22).

It should be noted that it is wrong to base the argument of agrarian reforms only on efficiency, technology and so on to achieve economic growth. We consider that equitable growth is a matter of political will and technology is merely a means to an

end. Therefore « It is otiose to discuss alternative methods of redistribution on income and structural change in agriculture on grounds of « efficiency » without taking into account the prevailing ideology of development in the society as a whole, without considering the interests of the ruling elites and the classes they are likely to defend » (Lehmann, 1974, p.23).

In economic terms efficiency is seen to achieve the best return from the capital invested. Here we should ask ourselves : efficiency for what and for whom? That is to say what is the ultimate aim of efficiency and what lies behind it. In a capitalist enterprise efficiency serves the purpose of profit-making by the constant reorganisation of the production process and the continuous transformation of technology. Furthermore, Gordon challenges the notion of efficiency in a capitalist society and argues that capitalist efficiency means « production processes embody capitalist efficiency if they best reproduce capitalist control over the production process and minimise proletarian resistance to that control » (1976, p.26). Although « efficiency is irrelevant by itself if the capitalist can not produce surplus value » (Ibid., p.21) it also deals with the way of organising the whole process of production in order to reproduce capitalist exploitation by maintaining workers « discipline and reproduce their over the means of production. Therefore efficiency in a capitalist enterprise means the preservation of the relations of production and the relations of domination of a class.

In socialist enterprise it is the social and the political dimension which should be focussed on . That can be achieved according to Gordon if it maximises the ability of the working class to increase its domination of the means of production and minimises the possibility of revisionist slippage back towards further ruling class domination (1976, p.29). It is obvious that the author means the workers control over the means of production when he says domination of the means of production.

I wish to push the argument further to come to my prime concern. The issue at stake here is whether under the collectivist system of cultivation the intended beneficiaries do adequately manage and control the process of production and the marketing of their products in order to reap the benefit of their work?

Or whether these schemes (co-operative and self-management estates) were merely introduced to exercise strict control over peasants. Thus turning them to wage labourers where the state can get what it wants : to provide cheap food to urban areas possibly in order to avoid confrontation with the urban working class over the issue of wage increases and also to provide industry with cheap raw materiel. The question is whether the exploitation of small farmers and agricultural labourers by landlords was merely transferred to the state?

So, what should be sought is not only the introduction of a land reform programme and its ideological intentions but we should also investigate whether the institutional structures are suitable for such a programme and examine what the programme depends greatly on the degree of participation of the intended beneficiaries in the control of the processes directly affecting their lives and also the people chosen to implement it. In other words it also requires the political mobilisation of the bureaucracy entrusted with the implementation of the programme. But the attainment of this aim is not easy, because the bureaucracy is most likely to be subject to political influences and

manipulation by landlords. Thus in the absence of a revolutionary situation like that of China, the bureaucracy may distort the implementation of the land reform.

A host of problems of Algeria's agrarian reforms stemmed from government's inability to create decentralised institutional structures which were essential to meet the needs of the collective workers and encourage their participation in decision-making on the self-managed estates and in the co-operatives. Central administrative control had been carefully protected since the introduction of the managed sector in 1962. Strict control was made possible because bureaucracy had a strong tendency to centralise decision-making especially in situations where there was a lack or weakness of political commitment to change and where also administrative structure were inadequate to expand participation for the intended beneficiaries. Effective participation requires the mobilisation of the peasants in order to make them responsible for their destiny. Thus the difficulties of creating a more productive agricultural sector are not only in increasing investment and introducing more modern methods in agriculture, but the most important factor is to make peasants masters of their own concerns ; by controlling the process of production and marketing their products.

### References

- 1- Dorner, P. (1972) : Land reform and economic development Penguin, Harmondsworth
- 2- Gordon, D.M. (1976) : Capitalist Efficiency and Socialist Efficiency in Monthly review, July - August
- 3- Gurley, J.G (1974) : Rural development in China in Edward, ED (Ed) : Employment in developing nations, Colombia univ. Pres, New-York.
- 4- Halliday, F (1979) : Iran Development and Dictatorship Penguin, London.
- 5- Lehmann, D (1974) : Agrarian Reform and Agrarian reformism Faber and Faber, London
- 6- Mehmet, O (1978) : Economic planning and Social Justice in developing countries, Croom Helm, London.
- 7- Ollawa, P.E (1977) : « On a Dynamic Model for rural Development in Africa » in Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol 15 .
- 8- Petras et al (1973) : Two approaches to Agrarian Reform in Latin America, In Bernstein, H (ed)