

# Social Ethics and Land Reform: The Case of El Salvador

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Growing landlessness among rural peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America pose value questions in agricultural development. Access to land is still the basic means to the accumulation of wealth in most poor countries. More basic still, arable plots of land are essential to the peasant subsistence farmer. At stake is not only a way of life, but survival itself. Infant and childhood malnutrition increase with fragmentation and miniaturization of subsistence plots.

Poor societies are under pressure to produce food for growing urban populations. Landlessness both increases the urban migration as well as places more pressure on the food production systems.

Third World economies are generally severely limited in their foreign-exchange earnings and try to maximize agricultural exports. Even during famine years, countries have been known to export food crops to maintain national economies.

But the direction of agricultural development is also determined by economic policies shaped by class interests. Peasants are often the least organized to protect their vital interests and are easily forced into landlessness and wage labor by larger landlords who seek to benefit from the economies of scale or a cheap labor pool.

In few societies does the dialogue on agricultural policy include the voice of the poor. Few planning ministries have peasants on their staff or more realistically even bother to seek peasant's views. They are no more consulted about agricultural development than the cow in the field.

Similarly land reform programs designed to address the imbalance between agricultural development and landlessness often do not match the real needs of the agrarian population because value considerations are unheard or ignored.

The ethics of land reform have taken on renewed urgency as concern for rural instability in Central America and elsewhere place U.S. sponsored land reform central to U.S.-Third World policies. Beginning in 1945, the United States has funded and been substantially involved in implementing land reforms in Japan (1945), South Korea (1949), Taiwan (1949), Italy (1950) Guatemala (1954), Philippines (1955/63), Colombia (1961), and South Vietnam (1970). The latest U.S.-backed land reform began in 1980 in El Salvador.

Each of the land reforms has taken place in countries characterized by rural instability. U.S. policy-makers and advisors have attributed this instability largely to inequalities in land ownership forcing many peasants off their traditional lands. Each

society also was seen by U.S. policy-makers as vulnerable to Communist subversion. Several, at the time of the land reform, were already in the throes of social rebellion.

The conundrum for policy-makers then was how best to affirm values in agricultural development and land reform as the basis of programs that would meet the food needs of both rural and urban populations while at the same time support the political objectives of the U.S.-backed regimes in power.

In at least several of the above land reforms studied, this dual set of value considerations has proved to be irreconcilable. The social rights of peasant populations and the economic interests of the national ruling class proved to be too far apart and, in fact, the source of the conflict.

The case of El Salvador is current and illustrative. Extreme disparity of income and well-being within the country is a consequence of the major concentration of land ownership and the resulting impoverishment of a displaced and now largely landless rural population.

Over two-thirds of the total population receive less than one third of disposable income. On the other side, less than two percent of the population possess one third of the income.<sup>1</sup> Even within the export sector, less than 6.5 percent of the coffee growers control over 78 percent of income derived from profits.<sup>2</sup>

In the rural areas, 83.5 percent of the rural population receives less than \$225 per capita.<sup>3</sup> Sixty percent of El Salvador's rural families earn the minimum \$528 (1976 prices) needed to buy subsistence food products.<sup>4</sup>

By all indices, the rural poor suffer inequities that limit their ability even to survive. More than 80 percent of rural families live without potable water or sanitary sewage facilities. Their housing is substandard and very few have electricity.<sup>5</sup> The effects of landlessness and poor living conditions are felt primarily by the children, U.S. A.I.D. has found that 73.4 percent of children under five showed signs of malnutrition, even though their parents had "a fair idea of what constitutes an adequate diet."<sup>6</sup>

Access to land is a major determinant of child mortality in El Salvador. One study of Tenancingo showed that the percentage of deaths for children under

16 declines rapidly from 48 percent among landless families to a plateau of about 20 percent for families owning 2.5 hectares or more. Mortality among children of tenant farmers was shown to be significantly higher.<sup>7</sup> With 60 percent of the rural population landless, child mortality is an overwhelming and tragic reality.

In the absence of a political opening to address these disparities, they become the pre-conditions for change through revolution. Alarmed at this prospect, the U.S. government in March of 1980 largely designed and financed (totaling over \$210 million) a land reform program to counter-act the growing insurrection.

Three competing motivations for the land reform grew out of disparate values. The first motivation for land reform was as a tool for counter-insurgency. Alberto Arene, a former minister from the reformist junta which had ousted the regime of General Carlos Romero in the Fall of 1979, wrote that the agrarian reform was implemented to allow hardline military officers the context in which they could pursue a counter-insurgency war against the opposition while placating the more moderate officers who had staged a coup in October 1979 which ousted General Carlos Romero. The moderates wanted to see structural changes in agrarian society to meet the needs of the peasantry. Whether the counter-insurgency plan of the hard-line officers was so methodical is difficult to determine; that it had the effect of identifying and targeting progressive peasant leadership seems clear. In his March 20, 1980 letter of resignation just three weeks after the start of the reform, Jorge Villacorta, the Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG) and one of the reform's architects charged that "from the first moment that the implementation of the agrarian reform began, what we saw was a sharp increase in official violence against the very peasants who were the supposed 'beneficiaries' of the process... To cite one case, five directors and two presidents of the new peasant management organizations were killed."<sup>8</sup> Recently, officials of the Salvadoran Communal Union, the largest union made up of farm laborers from the new land reform cooperatives, reported that in the first year of the reform over 90

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UCS leaders were killed and over 5000 peasants involved in the cooperatives murdered.

For the proponents of land reform as counter-insurgency, the lives of peasants and rural agricultural workers count for little. Historically in El Salvador, the rural poor have been viewed as not as fully developed as humans as the wealthy and powerful. Their sub-human living conditions were viewed not as the cause, but as the result of their natural inferiority: hence they were less entitled to manage the assets of Salvadoran society. This self-serving view of the rich as guardians of the culture led to the tolerance and even encouragement of violations of fundamental human rights as well as the denial of any semblance of lawful conduct toward the despised rural poor. Psychologically, this process of pseudo-speciation, to use Erikson's term,<sup>9</sup> allows for the construction of a system of values and ethical beliefs that is essentially racist and classist in its social expression yet allows for gentility and individualism within the families of the privileged.

The second motivation for the land reform was rural pacification. The reform, according to a recent report from AID "became a political imperative to help prevent political collapse, strike a blow to the Left and help prevent radicalization of the rural population."<sup>10</sup> As happened in South Vietnam in 1970, this motivation for land reform can be easily subordinated to counter-insurgency and death squad activity by those who wield the power of security forces.

Pacification, in its most benign form, is an acknowledgement of serious grievances and an attempt to placate them. Too often, however, it is a palliative that is offered rather than the more difficult process of rural development. As in the case of El Salvador, the palliative went far beyond cosmetic changes (e.g. the

expropriation of most landholdings above 500 hectares) but the changes proved to be poorly planned and implemented. The tragic consequences were predictable at the time of the land reform decrees.<sup>11</sup> The irony of pacification as a motive is that its failure to embrace the full spectrum of change necessary to sustain agrarian reform leads to greater instability and unrest among the very people it is designed to pacify. Myths abound and are propagated by the reform's spokespersons who assume more a role of public relations (or in the case of El Salvador, Congressional relations) than development administrators. At a time that Salvadoran peasants were being offered near desertified and fragmented minifundia through the largest phase (called Land-to-the-Tiller) of the Salvador land reform, consultants to U.S. A.I.D. reinforced the view (or hope) held by key Congressmen that the pacification through land reform was creating a rural middle class working U.S.-style family farms. For the Salvadoran peasant the reality was bitterly different. Not only were the plots often nearly worthless, but illegal evictions, intimidation and an impossible legal process of titling meant that only a small fraction of those said to be potential beneficiaries benefited in any meaningful way. Worse still, many thousands were killed as noted above, or were forced into camps for displaced persons or across national boundaries as refugees.

There is a cruelty to pacification programs which raise the hopes of impoverished people only to dash them as reality crushes down again. Those who advance such programs believe that the more important consideration is to protect society against subversion. They may hope that the poor masses can be helped to cope with their poverty. Yet their aim is still to lessen support for more sweeping changes, not necessarily to implement equitable ones.

The third motivation for land reform as rural development views the welfare of the landless as the most pressing consideration and attempts to design programs to effect lasting changes. Those who held this view in El Salvador risked, and some lost, their lives to implement the beginning of the land reform. In the spring of 1980, technicians of the Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian Transformation, the primary government institution responsible for implementing the early stages of the reform, left the newly formed cooperatives to strike in protest of government violence directed against the new cooperatives and the inadequacy of government administration of the reform.

Yet rural development programs if they are to meet the real needs of the poor must have more than the dedication of a small cadre of technicians. To truly assess the needs of the

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dispossessed, the poor themselves must be encouraged or allowed to articulate their problems and preferred course of change. This may be negotiated with the expert advice of agronomists and other specialists, but the participation of the intended beneficiaries is the sine qua non of rural development.

Experts at El Salvador's Ministry of Agriculture were taken by surprise when the Basic Agrarian Reform Law was announced on March 6, 1980. When asked about the law one former official replied,

...it was not known until the fifth of March that there really was going to be an agrarian reform. Everything was kept a big secret.... There was no discussion of it among the technical personnel....<sup>12</sup>

Participation in the formulation of the law appears to have been restricted to top ministerial positions and the Supreme Command of the Military. The Church, University, and agricultural technicians were wholly excluded from

the process. More importantly, however, was the complete exclusion of peasant organizations with perhaps one exception, the Union Comunal Salvadorena supported by the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labor Development. Numerous other legitimate peasant organizations were not recognized by the reform planners.

To those who view agrarian reform as rural development, the "bleak" future of the El Salvador land reform (as characterized by the Inspector General of U.S. A.I.D.)<sup>13</sup> comes as no surprise. The real needs of the landless and the rural poor were ignored by those for whom political or military expedience in carrying out the reform was the primary motivation.

The poorest and fastest growing sector of the rural population are the landless: those who do not sharecrop, rent or own land. Estimated at 60 percent of the rural population, this is the group which should have been primary beneficiaries of land reform. Oddly, the structure of the reform excluded them. Phase I of the reform, which expropriated agricultural properties over 500 hectares, permitted only two classes of beneficiaries: the small pool of skilled permanent employees, and the more numerous colonos or hacienda workers. The largest group of all, the desplazados or landless rural poor who cluster about the periphery of haciendas for seasonal wage labor, are not incorporated in the reform.

Phase II, which would have appropriated mid-sized and very productive properties, has no beneficiaries as it was never implemented.

Beneficiaries of Phase III of the reform, the "Land to the Tiller" program, are families already working land as tenants or sharecroppers. Their tenure on the land was insecure, as evidenced by the numerous illegal evictions which took place after decree 207 established their rights to apply for legal title to their small plots. The final blow to Phase III was struck by the legislative assembly, controlled by its conservative majority, which voted June 28, 1984 to terminate the "Land to the Tiller" program and thus bar additional peasants from applying for land titles. "The land reform program in this country is now formally paralyzed," said Jorge Camacho, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, and a leader

of the largest peasant union. "This is a future without promise. Land will go back to owners and the people will be kicked off." In this event, the population for whom no land is available will swell.

A land reform which excludes that poorest and largest class of rural people with no other options will neither pacify nor improve their standard of living. To the politicians who planned the land reform decrees, the desplazados - though the majority of the rural population - were simply invisible.

For agricultural development to incorporate the aspirations of the rural poor, planners must see value in consultation and participation. How else does one get at the causes of the problems and construct workable solutions? Prerequisite are the values of community, pluralistic and democratic in structure, compassionate and tolerant in attitude. The duty of a neighbor, rather than the absolute right of the individual is a perspective usually absent in policy debates across class and racial lines as well as in the personal mores of everyday life.

Years ago, Josiah Royce decried in The Religious Aspect of Philosophy the perspective and transformation needed:

What, then is our neighbor?  
 Thou hast regarded his  
 thought, his feeling, as  
 somehow different from thine.  
 Thou hast said, 'a pain in him  
 is not like a pain in me, but  
 something far easier to bear.'  
 He seems to thee a little less  
 living than thou; his life is  
 dim, it is cold, it is a pale  
 fire beside thy own burning  
 desires....So, dimly and by  
 instinct, hast thou lived with  
 thy neighbor, and has known  
 him not, being blind. Thou  
 has made [of him] a thing, no  
 Self at all. Have done with  
 this illusion and simply try  
 to learn the truth. Pain is  
 pain, joy is joy, every-  
 where, even as in thee... from  
 the lowest to the noblest, the  
 same conscious, burning,  
 wilful life is found, endless-  
 ly manifold as the forms of  
 the living creatures, un-  
 quenchable as the fires of the  
 sun, real as these impulses

that even now throb in thine  
 own little selfish heart.  
 Lift up thy eyes, behold that  
 life, and then turn away, and  
 forget it as thou canst; but,  
 if thou hast known that, thou  
 hast begun to know thy duty.

The obligation to equate all conscious life, to ease and avoid pain and poverty, is an acknowledgement of our common suffering and fate. We neither chose birth nor are we exempt from death. Simone Weil, in her "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations" describes the worldly manifestation of a person's longing for an absolute good. A person is bound "by the single and permanent obligation to remedy, according to his responsibilities and to the extent of his power, all the privations of soul and body which are liable to destroy or damage the earthly life of any human being whatsoever."

This obligation, Weil wrote, embraces one's public as much as one's private life. Such value considerations are today urgently needed in discussions of rural development and social change. National security arguments notwithstanding, agriculture and land reform programs which wither in the light of this permanent obligation should never have found their way into policy.

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- (5) U. S. AID, Agricultural Sector Assessment, El Salvador (Washington, D. C., U. S. AID, 1977), pp. 20-21.
- (6) Ibid., p. 20.

(7) William Durham, Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 86.

(8) Resignation Letter of Jorge Alberto Villacorta, 22 March 1980.

(9) Erik Erikson uses the term pseudo-speciation to explain the rigidity in thinking about one's enemies, e. g. the "Russians".

(10) U. S. AID, AID Management Response to Inspector General's Audit of El Salvador Agrarian Reform (Washington, D. C., U. S. AID, 1984), p. 2.

(11) See, Laurence R. Simon and James

C. Stephens, Jr., "Salvador Land 'Reform'", New York Times, January 6, 1981. Also Simon and Stephens, El Salvador Land Reform 1980-1981 (Boston: Oxfam America, 1981).

(12) Interview with former official of El Salvador's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Washington, DC, 20 July, 1980.

(13) Inspector General, Agrarian Reform in El Salvador: A Report on its Status -- Audit Report No. 1-519-84-2 (Washington, DC, U. S. AID) January 1984. This report's findings, contested by A.I.D. Management, shows the land reform crippled by debt, violence and near collapse.

## COMMENTARY

*Hugh Popenoe*

Hugh Popenoe is Director of the Center for Tropical Agriculture, University of Florida and Professor of Agronomy, Botany, Geography, and Soils. He is past chairman of the Advisory Committee for Technology Innovation for the National Research Council. Dr. Popenoe was born in Honduras and has worked extensively in Central America where he has been involved in directing various technical assistance programs, including a program for small farmers in El Salvador. He has published widely in the field of tropical agriculture.

The author makes a good case for participation by the intended beneficiaries in consultations and decision making on land reform. He also emphasizes the divergent and often conflicting goals of reform. Using El Salvador as an example, he cites three: (1) a tool for counterinsurgency (2) rural pacification (3) welfare of the landless. The last one, he argues well, is the only one with any validity and permanence. Nevertheless, his statement that "access to land is still the basic means to the accumulation of wealth in most poor countries" may be more a reflection of the past than a vision of the future.

However, El Salvador may be a poor case for extolling the virtues of land reform to promote social and economic equity. El Salvador is a small country with a population of almost five million, the second most densely populated in the hemisphere. The available cropland per individual is

about one-half the world average or 0.15 ha/person. If the total cropland were divided among the agricultural laborers 0.91 ha would be available for each; if divided among the rural population, each family of five would receive 1.26 ha. Obviously, the population will continue to increase while the land base will remain constant.

The long term solution to El Salvador's political and social ills is not to distribute an inadequate and fixed land base among an ever increasing population. Such a strategy is more appropriate for countries that have a low man/land ratio or large areas of underutilized arable soils. One could argue that 1.26 ha, especially on poorer soils, might enrich a family socially, but may not put much money in its pocket or food on the table. Instead, the future of El Salvador should depend on a strategy that enables its wealth of human resources to be trained in other skilled professions to broaden the economic base in addition to a land distribution system that enhances production.

Obviously these figures on distributing all of the cropland to all of the agricultural laborers is carrying L. R. Simon's argument to the extreme. However, even if the land were to be divided among one-fourth of the agricultural laborers, the costs of providing services to so many small farms would place a tremendous economic and social burden on the country.