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Land Reform: An Analysis of Definitions, Types and Approaches

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Abstract

There is a surfeit of literature on land reforms in various developing countries. Whilst most of the existing literature has principally concentrated on the analysis of examples of land reforms in recent years, there is a paucity of literature detailing what really entails the concept of land reform. Most scholars and development agencies are concentrating on the success or lack thereof, of land reforms without interrogating the concept of land reform. An analysis of what constitutes land reform facilitates further analysis of the success of examples of land reforms around the world. In this paper the researcher gives an overview of the concept of land reform and its various approaches as applied in various parts of the world. Examples will be drawn from countries that have implemented land reforms in recent years, without necessarily interrogating their successes or lack thereof.

Keywords: Land reforms, development agencies, developing countries

Introduction

There is a plethora of literature on land reforms in various developing countries contributed by agricultural economists, political scientist, historians, journalists, development scholars and researchers among others. Whilst most of the existing literature has principally concentrated on the analysis of examples of land reforms in recent years, there is a paucity of literature detailing what really entails the concept of land reform. Most scholars and development agencies are concentrating on the success or lack thereof, of land reforms without interrogating the concept of land reform. An analysis of what constitutes a land reform facilitates further analysis of the success of examples of land reforms around the world.

In this paper the researcher gives an overview of the concept of land reform and its various approaches as applied in various parts of the world. Examples will be drawn from countries that have implemented land reforms in recent years, without necessarily interrogating their successes or lack thereof. This paper seeks to argue that land reforms can only be judged to be successful or unsuccessful after an in-depth interrogation of the concept and what really constitute them.

Land reform as a concept has been subjected to a scholarly microscope by scholars, economists, development practitioners as well as development agencies in the past half century. While there might seem to be consensus on the definition of land reform, the approach and justification of land reform have proved to be a highly contested arena. According to the conventional definition, redistributive land reform is a public policy

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that transfers property rights over large private landholdings to small farmers and landless farm workers (Griffin *et al.*, 2002). Therefore land reform can be reasoned to be the change in the ownership of the property rights of land, normally involving a change from large privately owned land to previously landless small scale farmers. Land reform is concerned with changing the institutional structure governing human relation with land by intervening in the prevailing land ownership, control and usage (World Bank, 1975; Macmillan, 2000). Thus it can further be argued accordingly that the concept land reform is not confined to transfer of land ownership rights but it also encompasses the rights pertaining to its control and usage. In addition, with the commercialisation of agriculture these property rights should further be secured through title deeds, which can be utilised by the small scale farmers to secure funding from banks and financial institutions. According to Sam Moyo, one of the prominent researchers on Zimbabwe's land reform, equitable land distribution relates to the distribution of land, denoting the deconcentration of prime land, the increased absolute number of landholders (Moyo, 1999). Thus, land reform can be viewed as the transfer of land ownership rights from the minority to the majority who were previously marginalised due to various reasons. The bequest of settler colonialism in many countries contributed to the unequal distribution of land, which can be argued to have necessitated and justified calls for land reform. More than three decades after political independence in Africa access to land is largely still the product of settler colonial policies. Policies that were designed to alienate the land from the majority indigenous population and thereby weakening their control over the resource. This alienation was further buttressed by deliberate colonial policies that subsidised white settler farming through preferential marketing and financing at the expense of the already marginalised and often crowded communal farmers. Thus, most land reforms have been pushed for and justified by this

need to try and redress these imbalances which can be attributed to the long-term effects of the colonial policies in the developing countries.

Land is a critical asset and its centrality to the provision of a means of livelihood through the production and sale of crops and other products has been well researched. According to the Economic Commission for Africa the centrality of land tenure to the attainment of sustainable development especially amongst the poor and vulnerable in rural settings is indeed the subject of many regional and national initiatives and meetings in Sub-Sahara (Wiggins, 2003). Most of the people in the developing world can be argued to be relying on the land for their livelihoods hence the justification that land reform can actually capacitate them through an increase in their asset base. The poor people often engage in land related economic pursuits for sustenance and survival, which ranges from growing of crops for family consumption and selling of the surplus, rearing of animals among others. Thus for these populations, a change in the land ownership rights that successfully provides secure access to land is an essential avenue for escaping from poverty and its calamitous effects.

By and large no unanimity on the reasons and justification of land reform can be reached among scholars, however it can be argued that there is an apparent need for the land redistribution due to the criticality of land in the livelihoods of people in the developing countries. What land reform implies in practice always depends on the context and particular circumstances, but the primary motivation of land reform is to alleviate poverty by reducing economic inequality (Lipton, 1974). Due to the criticality of land to the livelihoods of people in the developing world it can be reasoned that by availing more land at their disposal it will be a strategy for poverty alleviation. However, it can be argued further that giving land to the landless does not entirely translate automatically into

poverty alleviation. Just the ownership of land by the formerly landless poor will not subsequently mean that they have escaped from the gnashes of poverty but only entail provision of a means to an end. The main economic rationale for land reform lies in the inverse-farm productivity relationship, which argues that for given technology levels, small farms are more efficient than large farms due mainly to fewer problems of supervision (Deininger *et al.*, 2003). Hence, the justification for land reform can be drawn from different perspectives ranging from political, social justice, economic rationale as well as poverty reduction. This writer is of the perspective that land reform should be viewed as a poverty reduction strategy in developing countries. Accordingly, the concept of land reform should be implemented with the view to addressing poverty, which resonates with Millennium Development Goal on poverty alleviation. Addressing issues of access and ownership of resources such as land should be advocated for as a sure way of providing a means of capacitating the world's poor in order for them to escape the calamitous effects of poverty.

Land reforms have been implemented around the world over the past few decades with varying impacts, both successes and failures have been recorded. It should be noted from the onset research on land reform has always been contested because the subject is highly emotional and subjected to polarised media coverage. In most cases the implementation and thereafter the study of the land reform has been highly politicised and both internal and external forces strive to ensure its failure. At times seemingly apparent successes have been packaged and publicised as dismal failures, which brings to the fore the question: What really constitutes a successful land reform? Or rather is there any chance of a successful land reform? Thus addressing these critically questions would shade more light on the deliberation on the concept of land reform. A good case in point is the recent land reform in Zimbabwe which has

attracted negative media and has been labelled as a complete failure. It is telling to note that despite evidence to the contrary on the ground the media and in political circles Zimbabwe's land reform is still viewed as the mother of all calamities. Thus, it is imperative that debates on the success of land reforms be based on empirical evidence not hearsay as revealed by the case of Zimbabwe.

Evidence from research findings reveal that land reforms have contributed to redressing colonial injustices, reduced poverty and increasing productivity. There is an apparent unanimity among authorities that land reforms in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, have made a foremost contribution to overcoming the bequest of colonial development (King, 1973). Thus, it can be reasoned that land reform can be utilised as a strategy for addressing the long-term effects of colonial policies in the developing countries. Furthermore, in Brazil, land reform has clearly been revealed to be economically viable – having scope of increasing beneficiary income up to 5-fold (Deininger and Binswanger 1999). Not only does land reform address the legacy of colonial development, evidence from empirical research has shown as typified by the Brazilian case above that land can actually lead to economic benefits accruing to the beneficiaries. Thus, it can be argued that there is overwhelming evidence on the successes brought about by land reform in different parts of the world to merit it as poverty reduction strategy, economic intervention as well as social justice.

In addition, it can be revealed that there is little doubt that the land reform can provide a source of income for the poor, based on the pragmatic substantiation provided by a plethora of researchers that have recognized the existence of a positive link between land and incomes. Hence, it can be reasoned that there is observed evidence to the effect that there is indeed a positive relationship between land reform and income. Despite empirical evidence land reforms have been

vilified by the media and on the ground that they disrupt agricultural production in developing countries without any empirical evidence to support this purported agricultural production disruption.

Types of land reform

Redistributive land reform

This form of land reform consist of the redistribution of land rights from one sector to another, for example by privatising state land or taking from large landholders, and giving it to people who have no land (UN/ECE, 1996). This entails the change in land rights from basically the 'haves', who own large tracts of land to the 'have-nots'-people without land, usually referred to as the landless.

Tenurial reform

This arrangement of land reform aims to improve the ownership type over the land which is already in the people's possession but lack secure property rights. It can be argued that it addresses the issue of title deeds to the ownership of the land. Land registration and titling can also be regarded as tenurial reform, as it entitles the occupier with ownership with enhanced tenure security and rights.

Restitution

Land restitution is rarely discussed as it is also rarely implemented in most countries and can be argued to be the most difficult to implement. It involves returning the land to people or descendants of people who were removed from the land, these are previous land owners who were dispossessed of their land. However, the process is usual slow as there is need to ascertain which people occupied a certain area and due to movements that have occurred during more than a century of colonial rule it is difficult to implement. This scenario is further compounded by the absence of records or evidence from the dispossessed to validate their land rights claims as typified by the evident slow and frustrating land restitution in South Africa.

Land consolidation

Land consolidation is a method of land reform in which all landowners within an area capitulate their land and are allocated new parcels of comparable value but in pattern that encourages the more efficient and productive use of the land (UN/ECE, 1996). Hence, land consolidation can be viewed as the reallocation of farms to make bigger farm units, such as in Japan, Western Europe. The other main objective of this type of land reform is to reduce fragmentation of land, such as in Vietnam.

Approaches of land reform

State-led approach

In the state-led approach, the state takes a deliberate policy to redistribute land. It can be argued that it is a land reform from above, as the state introduces and guides the whole process of land reform. The execution takes place with a top-down methodology and bureaucratic modalities. State-led land reform programs were instigated after the independence from colonisation of various countries in 1950s to 1980s around the globe.

Community based approach

Community based approach can be argued to be the antonym of state-led land reform, in that it is initiated from below. Community based approach of land reform is emerging as an alternative approach to state-led approach. This approach is supposed to be more reactive to political demands originating 'from below' and more responsive to local interests, institutions and practices. However, this approach is usually high jacked by the state as it seeks to align itself with the aggrieved landless people who would have taken matters into their hands and many a times illegally.

Market assisted approach

The term 'market-assisted' is also found to be synonymously used as market-led, market mediated, or negotiated in literatures (Bobrow-Strain, 2004). In this approach, land ownership rights are transferred

through the buying and selling of land on the market. The landless people or smallholders are financed to get land through buying land from the large farm owners. This is the least followed approach because of financial constraints on the governments of developing countries to finance any meaning large scale transfer of land to the poor landless people. In addition, the large scale farmers many a times are not willing to sell and thus curtail any meaningful reform by demanding unrealistic prices for their land. This is can be exemplified by the case of Zimbabwe prior to 1997 when no meaningful transfer was achieved through the willing seller-willing buyer approach to land reform.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis concludes that it is imperative that analysis of the concept land reform, its types and approaches be done before analysing the success or lack thereof. This paper analysed various arguments that have been proffered to justify land reform around the world. The main types of land reform that have been implemented in different parts of the world are redistributive land reform, tenurial reform restitution and land consolidation. Approaches to the land reform that have been witnessed around the world include state-led, which is from above and government initiated, community based approach, which can be said to be from below as it driven by citizen hunger for land and lastly there is market assisted approach.

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