

## BOOK REVIEWS

# LAND FOR THE PEOPLE?

a review by Julia Bastian  
of a recent  
Oxfam publication

IN the words of President Reagan: "trade, free enterprise and private investment are more effective ways of assisting under-developed countries than by increasing the level of official aid flows." The President, with Mrs. Thatcher, Lord Carrington and 20 other heads of State, recently attended a conference held on a tiny island off the coast of Mexico, to discuss the world economic problems that flow from the "inequality" between the "comfortable" nations of the North and the "poor" nations of the South.

Oxfam's small booklet *Land for People: Land tenure and the very poor\** is a timely contribution to the debate. This remarkable charity has evolved over the last 30 years from a disaster-relief organisation into a worldwide body closely involved with economic development in the Third World. Gone are the days when it merely provided technical equipment such as half-a-dozen sewing machines or a tractor. They have since come to realise that the power structure of a country and the directly-related question of who owns the land have a strong bearing on the effectiveness of economic aid. They now admit that some of their well-meaning agricultural projects directed to the poor were built on shaky foundations. A landlord or a government can choose, at any time, to evict tenants or disband casual labour from land even though Oxfam has funded technical advances that were beginning to improve the quality of life for the workers there. In the end it is always the owner of the land who benefits. Oxfam now fund services which give legal advice about land problems, for instance on projects that help people to form marketing co-operatives in order to prevent the fruits of their labour going to speculators. And for the millions who have no land, and those dependent on seasonal agricultural work, Oxfam support their efforts to obtain fairer wages.

Ever since 1974, world debate on the eradication of poverty has put the emphasis on the need to produce more food. The conventional wisdom has been that Third World countries should be helped through aid and trade concessions to produce more food, to increase their employment and thus increase their buying power.

Oxfam now point out that the benefits of trade concessions and aid are rarely passed on to the poor. In the booklet they examine the policies and activities of

international aid and investment institutions and ask whether these activities really help. Perhaps in the long run, they suggest, these well-intended moves actually harm the poor, many of whom lose their jobs when modernisation takes place, when irrigation schemes open up or when foreign banks lend money for massive commercial ventures.

Oxfam see it this way: "If a rural family or community has *secure* use of a piece of land, they will almost certainly grow their own food before they consider any other crop or activity. The same land in the hands of a landlord, a government or a foreign firm is far more likely to be used to grow whatever is most profitable and that would not be food for local consumption." The multi-national companies, for example, use land for crops which the poor cannot afford to buy.

Rural poverty, they conclude, is not simply a technical problem, a consequence of too little food or a lack of agricultural development. Oxfam maintain that it is a complex social, economic and political problem with the *control and ownership of land central to the whole issue.*

Oxfam's misgivings about the effectiveness of aid programmes are supported by the dismal facts relating to world poverty.

During the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in the number of poor in the world which cannot be attributed purely to the increase in population. A higher percentage of the world's population is now well below the poverty line, as defined by the World Bank. Yet during the same period these same countries achieved substantial growth. To some, this combination of increased growth alongside increasing poverty is perplexing. Yet if Oxfam and the World Bank had studied the works of Henry George – principally his book *Progress and Poverty* – they need have experienced no surprise. For George leaves no one in doubt about the root cause of this "great enigma of our times."

As one example of mis-directed aid, Oxfam cite some recent activity of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). Oxfam point out that the FAO produced a plan for 1969/70 which put the emphasis on mechanisation. The result was certainly greater production but for whom? Hundreds of rural tenants lost their plots when the landlords threw them off the land in order to benefit from offers of mechanisation. Countless seasonal labourers are now out of work because their jobs are done by machines.

So the light appears to be dawning on Oxfam. Their booklet considers the wide question of land ownership in the Third World in the light of their overseas programme of rural development. It describes their increasing awareness of the relationship between land tenure and power structures.

Oxfam point out that land ownership in the Third World is highly concentrated. In South America for example the top two per cent of the farming population control 47 per cent of the land. In India, the top 22 per cent of landowners hold 76 per cent of the land – a figure unchanged for 20 years.

The majority of rural people are tenants and do not have control over the land resources in the areas where they live. For this reason the vast majority of the world's estimated 4,250 million live in extreme poverty and hunger. In 1981, millions more are on the brink.

In a chapter on Land Reform various ways forward are considered. Many efforts have been made to reform land tenure, some linked with changes in the power-balance but one suspects that most are merely

cosmetic changes. "Land is power and no one gives up power easily." Few people, say Oxfam, are actually against land reform but some are worried about the likely repercussions and for this reason advise against it . . . Some see it as the ultimate panacea. (No mention here of the Single Tax).

The chapter describes some instant land reform packages that could be introduced into any country but suggests that results would be disastrous for one reason or another. Oxfam is also aware that the existing land tenure systems breed violence. It is little wonder that peasants who are surely oppressed and hungry resort to stealing the landlord's crops at harvest time to sell on the black market.

Another well worn argument is that if only population could be reduced there would be more for those remaining. Landlessness and birthrates, poverty and malnutrition are all closely linked, but to concentrate on reducing population ignores the root cause of poverty – the unequal division of the resources of nature. The problem is not so much an overcrowding of land but the control of so much land by the few, leaving so little land – and often enough the worst land – for the many.

It is encouraging to learn that so many countries have introduced programmes they describe as 'land reform', some of them springing out of pressure by the

United States through President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, a programme of aid for Latin America in the 1960s. Most of these produced negligible results in the face of entrenched power structures. Oxfam describe some of them as disastrous.

Finally the booklet discusses the future effects of present international attitudes to poverty and hunger. The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, held in July 1979 under the auspices of the FAO, endorsed much of the work done by Oxfam. Here is a body who now believes strongly that "unless a society is organised to allow the benefits of growth to reach all its people, any technical improvement will always benefit the richer and stronger members of society more than the poor." They note with regret however, that "few governments are sincerely interested in social justice for the poor."

Although Oxfam offers no solution to the peoples of Third World countries they do open up the debate and give it a push towards the only real solution.

In doing so, they inspire hope that, some day, they will see the full light and realise that the solution they seek to the problem of the landless and the hungry in the Third World has been available to them – between the covers of *Progress and Poverty* – for the past 100 years.

*\*Land for People: Land tenure and the very poor*, edited by Claire Whittemore. Published by Oxfam Public Affairs Unit, Price £1.30. Available from : Oxfam, 274 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 7DZ.

Commenting on the publication of *Land for People*, John Rowley in *The Guardian* has this to say:

"When an earlier version of this Oxfam Report made its appearance at the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in Rome in 1979,

the conference organisers from the Food Agricultural Organisation attempted to prevent its distribution. That was a clumsy mistake, but it is not difficult to see why the attempt was made.

"From the FAO's point of view and that of other major aid donors, and many governments

who were anxious to protest their commitment to rural development, it is a thoroughly subversive document.

"Drawing on years of first-hand Oxfam experience in working with the very poor, the report concludes that the chief causes of persistent hunger and poverty in Third World villages

are not lack of investment in the countryside, rapid population growth, environmental deterioration, or the lopsided international economic order: the root cause is "the existence of unjust land tenure systems and the political, economic, and social policies which enable these systems to prevail."

**A**BOUT two hundred miles inland from the United States' Atlantic seaboard lies a vast region of mountain ridges, valleys and plateaux known as Appalachia. It is an area of great natural wealth – mainly coal, iron ore and timber – which stretches almost a thousand miles from Alabama in the south to Pennsylvania in the north, taking in large tracts of six intervening states – Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia and the two Carolinas.

By any standards of measuring natural resources, Appalachia is a rich country. Yet within its boundaries live some of the USA's poorest people. Indeed, it rivals the Deep South as one of the major depressed areas of the USA, with poverty-stricken hillbilly farmers eking out bare livings in a landscape scarred and disfigured by the activities of the big mining corporations. The whole area, according to a recent Washington Post report, is "deeply addicted to Government assistance."

## POVERTY IN APPALACHIA

A corner of the USA by-passed by the Affluent Society

..... Bert Brookes

The glaring paradox prompted one member of a 1978 seminar held by the Highlander Folk School of Tennessee to put the simple question: "Why is the land so rich and our people and schools so poor?"

To answer the question, a number of community groups and individuals in the region combined their resources to set up a study group which they called, perhaps a little colourfully, the Appalachian

Land Ownership Task Force. Their purpose was to determine to what extent land ownership patterns in the area were affecting social conditions in the rural communities.

The study involved some 60 investigators in surveying over 55,000 parcels of property and reviewing 20 million acres of land in 80 counties.

The study group found\* that there were three basic factors which could explain the persistence