

turn generates much of the emotive ecological damage.

The solution is sketched in the articles on pages 24 and 26. In summary, we believe that land value taxation, a fiscal policy elaborated by Henry George,⁴ is the most appropriate remedy.

Until we appreciate the underlying economic cause of ecological damage to Mother Earth, it will not be possible to persuade people and their institutions to adopt the appropriate policies.

Land & Liberty is therefore opening up the debate on what it believes to be a seriously-neglected issue: the connection between land monopoly and the eco-crisis. When the mechanism has been adequately documented, the powerful environmental lobby will be in a position to appreciate the vital contribution which land value taxation can make to re-establishing harmony between man and his land.

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FORTHCOMING

GROUND RULES FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

- a critique of ecologists who neglect to define an appropriate system of land tenure as a complementary part of any programme of reform for industrialised economies.

This article by David Richards appears in the next issue of *Land & Liberty*.

Previous articles on ecology include:

Turangawaewae! Betty Noble reports how New Zealand's Values Party incorporated Maori traditions of land tenure into its policies. Nov.-Dec. 1979.

Site-value Rating and the Environment, by Richard Grinham: Jan.-Feb. 1978.

Ecologists back to whose Land? by Fred Harrison: Sept.-Oct. 1976.

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Ecology and the billion-sized threat: landlessness

Protection of our productive soils and ecologically vital forests are not likely to be achieved without radical land reforms, warns Erik Eckholm.

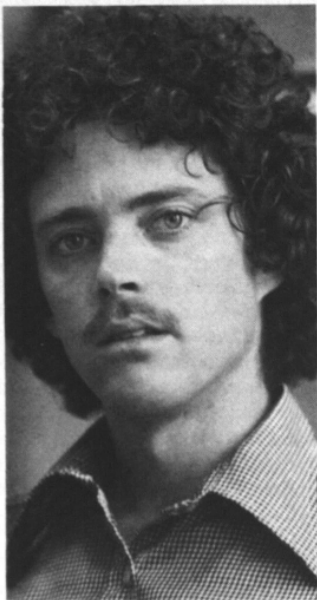
SOMETIMES argued with ballots, sometimes argued with bullets, and mostly argued with words the debate about land reform has resurfaced time and again in the twentieth century. Yet today, perhaps because of their very familiarity, arguments about the social and economic benefits of equitable farmland distribution often seem stale and tired. Among many of those actively involved in development planning, concern about land reform has quietly slipped into a state of functional dormancy. Many of the world's urban residents seem to think about land reform as a rather outdated concern - when they think about it at all.

But the world's farmers and farm workers know better. In mainly agrarian societies, the struggle for control of the land and its fruits is a constant one, always simmering beneath the surface and sometimes exploding into violence. Over the next two decades, as the number of rural people lacking secure access to farmland approaches one billion, conflict rooted in inequality of landownership is apt to become more acute in country after country.

Many of the international community's widely shared goals - the elimination of malnutrition, the provision of jobs for all, the slowing of runaway rural-urban migration, the protection of productive soils and ecologically vital forests - are not likely to be achieved without radical changes in the ownership and control of land. It is a delusion to think that the basic needs of the world's poorest people will be met without renewed attention to politically sensitive land-tenure questions. It is an even greater delusion to think that the dispossessed of the earth will watch their numbers grow and their plights worsen without protesting. The issue of land reform will not go away.

THROUGHOUT history, patterns of landownership have shaped patterns of human relations in nearly all societies. They have also helped determine the possibility and pace of economic change. In agrarian societies, land is the primary productive asset, the tangible expression of economic and hence political power. Some tenure patterns have manifested and solidified social inequality while others have promoted social mobility or even something approaching equality. Some tenure patterns have blocked technological progress while others have encouraged it. And invariably, changing the relationship of people to the land has meant changing the relationship

World-watch ecologist Erik Eckholm spells out the stark facts about the rural poor in the Third World



of people to one another – the stuff of political struggles and sometimes of wars or revolutions.

As societies industrialize, the primacy of agricultural landownership as a determinant of political and economic power wanes. New elites have often accrued power through control of capital, technology, or military force. Access to a broad array of nonagricultural jobs has freed many people from long-standing, stifling ties to poor land or to rich landlords. Yet even in the most economically advanced countries, landownership remains a significant source of wealth and influence. In the US, where only one in every 28 people lives on a farm, changes in the size and ownership of farms are today generating questions about the implications for employment, resource use, and community welfare. Landholding patterns in industrial countries do not have the pervasive social impact they once had, but they still influence the quality of life and the distribution of income.

In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where three-fourths of the world's people live, the control of farmland remains a principal key to wealth, status, and power. A large majority of the people in most Third World countries live in rural areas, and most of these must make a living through agriculture if they are to make a living at all. While rural land-tenure and social patterns vary greatly from place to place, it is generally true that where a few individuals own a large share of the land, these same individuals dominate local politics and – through their roles as lenders, landlords, and employers – the economic lives of their neighbours. In other regions, a larger number of farmers owning small or medium-sized plots may predominate. Under such conditions these landowners, too, may be the controllers of wealth and power; at the least, they usually enjoy a certain economic security and the possibility of personal economic progress.

Whatever land-tenure pattern prevails in a given area, it is the landless and the near-landless who are on the bottom. Hundreds of millions of families are struggling to improve their lives through agriculture without secure access to the basis of agricultural life – farmland. Many sell their labour to more fortunate farmers for whatever pittance they can get; others rent land at exorbitant rates under conditions insecure enough to smother incentives for investment and technical progress; still others scratch what produce they can from inadequately sized, often

fragmented family plots and then seek other employment in order to make ends meet.

The landless, the insecure tenants, and those owning marginal plots too small to support a family together constitute nearly all the poorest of the poor – those whose basic needs for food, fuel, shelter, education, health care, and family planning are frequently unmet. It is in many cases they who are born into debt and die in debt, who see up to half their infants die before age five, who live chronically on a tight-wire of survival from which they can quickly fall if the weather or the international economy turns against them. In Bangladesh during the food-short year of 1975, the death rate among the landless was triple that among people owning three or more acres of land.¹

Discussions of the rural poor, like the programmes designed to help them, too often lump all of them together as “small farmers.” The truly poor often seem invisible to urban elites and the international experts concerned about rural poverty. As Milton J. Esman of Cornell University writes of the indiscriminate use of the term “small farmer”:

Not only does this imprecise catch-all term conceal the many specific differences which distinguish rural households by asset position, occupation, income, and ethnicity, but it tends to produce an image of the rural poor as Asian, African or Latin American versions of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer with relatively small but secure holdings which, with the help of improved technologies, cropping practices, inputs, production incentives, and marketing could provide a decent family livelihood. Helping the rural poor is thus conceived as providing better services to this version of the “small farmer.”

In some countries there are many small farm households which more or less fit this image and have a reasonable chance of providing decent family livelihoods under prevailing institutional conditions. They need and could benefit from the help of governments and development agencies. But they are seldom the majority of rural households and they are certainly not the poorest.²

Landless labourers, sharecroppers, and marginal farmers together constitute the majority of rural residents in most countries of Asia and Latin America and are increasing in number in Africa. They have generally been bypassed by the global development process; in fact, development programmes not carefully designed to improve their status can worsen it, which is why the frequent failure to distinguish between the landless and the more secure small farmers is of more than academic concern.

Recent studies in a host of countries – including Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and parts of India – indicate that the absolute incomes of some groups have declined over the last two decades, often in the face of considerable growth in gross national product (GNP) and agricultural output. Similar studies in many other countries would undoubtedly reveal similar patterns: falling real wages for some farm labourers; the absorption of marginal landholdings by better-off farmers; the ejection of tenants by landowners seeking to take advantage of profitable new technologies or to avoid threatened tenancy reforms.³

In the Asian countries examined by Esman and his colleagues, the proportion of rural families that are landless or nearly so ranges from a low of 53 per cent in India to a high of 85 per cent on the Indonesian island of Java. (See Table 1.) In the Latin American countries covered, these categories account for anywhere from 55 per cent of rural residents in Costa Rica to 85 per cent in Bolivia and Guatemala. Similar data are not available for Africa, but indications are that the comparable proportions for most of that continent would be considerably smaller than they are in Asia and Latin America.

Conservative extrapolations of the available data suggest that, altogether, more than 600 million people live in rural households that are either completely landless or that lack secure access to adequate farmland. Not coincidentally, this rough figure approaches the World Bank's estimate that nearly 800 million people live in "absolute poverty... at the very margin of existence." Along with the most destitute urban slum dwellers – themselves usually refugees from rural landlessness – landless labourers and those farming insecure or marginal plots are the absolutely poor.⁴

Roughly half the world's most desperately poor people live in South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. In these three countries, according to a World Bank study, some 28 per cent of rural households are "totally landless and support a population of 157 million people by their wage labour alone in environments where unemployment and underemployment are widespread." Perhaps as many more are farming marginal plots or renting under oppressive conditions. In noncommunist Asia as a whole, reports the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), some 30 per cent of the rural labour force is completely landless.⁵

Throughout most of Asia, the average farm is quite small by international standards; in most Asian countries, more than 90 per cent of all farms are smaller than ten hectares. Among those fortunate enough to own farmland, ownership in Asia tends to be more broadly based than it is in Latin America. Inequality among landowners is nonetheless substantial. Eleven per cent of Bangladesh's families own more than half the country's land. In India in 1971, 70 per cent of the farms were smaller than two hectares and included just 21 per cent of the total farmland, while 4 per cent of the farms were larger than ten hectares and occupied 31 per cent of the farmland. In the Philippines in 1971, just 5 per cent of the farms were larger than ten hectares but they accounted for 34 per cent of all cropland. By contrast, in South Korea, where significant land reforms have been carried out, 92 per cent of the farms were three hectares or smaller in 1974, and they accounted for 93 per cent of all the farmland.⁶

The European colonization of the Americas was in many regions accompanied by the establishment of huge estates and plantations. In the mid-nineteenth century in the United States, however, many factors – among them the emancipation of slaves following a bloody civil war, and a federal homestead programme under which public lands in the Midwest and West were given out in parcels specifically intended to function as family farms – encouraged the breakdown of the plantation economy and the emergence of a family-farm-based agrarian structure renowned since for its productiveness and social benefits. Today, although large-scale corporate farms are assuming ever more significant economic roles, close to 90 per cent of all US farms are still family-operated.⁷

Throughout most of Latin America, in contrast, huge private estates have remained predominant. In the US in 1974, the largest 7 per cent of farms accounted for 27 per cent of the nation's farmland. But in Latin America, reports the FAO, 7 per cent of the landowners possessed a startling 93 per cent of the arable land as of 1975. A survey of agrarian structures in seven Latin American countries, carried out in the mid-sixties by the Interamerican Committee for Agricultural Development (a consortium of UN and regional agencies), revealed that the "latifundia stereotype" of Latin America, while oversimplified, "does not grossly exaggerate reality." Large farms employing more than 12 people accounted for more than 40 per cent of all cropland in Colombia, Ecuador,

Table 1: Landless and Near-Landless People in Selected Asian and Latin American Countries*

Country	Number of Rural Households	Landless and Near-Landless as Share of Rural Households
	(millions)	(per cent)
Asia		
Bangladesh	11.85	75
India	86.00	53
Java, Indonesia	9.39	85
Philippines	4.43	78
Sri Lanka	1.89	77
Latin America		
Bolivia	.61	85
Brazil	9.72	70
Colombia	2.40	66
Costa Rica	.23	55
Dominican Rep.	.74	68
Ecuador	.86	75
El Salvador	.53	80
Guatemala	.66	85
Mexico	4.50	60
Peru	1.48	75

*Data for assorted years in the early seventies.
Source: Milton J. Esman.

and Guatemala; for 60 per cent of Brazil's farmland; and for more than four-fifths of the cropland in Chile and Peru. At the same time, nearly 90 per cent of the farms in Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru were too small to support a family.⁸

LANDLESSNESS and land concentration have long plagued portions of North Africa, and, until its recent revolution, Ethiopia was notorious for the near feudal conditions under which many of its peasants laboured. Throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, however, traditional tenure systems, in which land is owned by the tribe and allocated to individuals for the use but not for sale, have predominated. Outside experts have often seen the need for individual land titles that could provide greater personal-investment incentives as the "land reform" challenge of Africa. The apparent availability of large unused areas has further fed the notion that landlessness is not a threat in sub-Saharan Africa.

This relatively benign image of African tenure problems is, however, increasingly misleading. To begin with, the large empty spaces create a mistaken impression. In vast areas of Africa, the climate, soils, or other ecological factors make farming or even grazing impossible. In addition, writes John Cohen of Harvard University, "Africa's poor soils and limited rainfall often allow for only extensive land use and typically require fallow periods or costly investment in fertilizer and irrigation. In such conditions, access to 10 to 20 hectares of land means little and such an African household might be less secure than a Bangladesh peasant household holding less than two hectares."⁹

The truth is that land scarcity is emerging as a problem in more and more parts of Africa. Where populations are pressing against the arable land base, traditional tenure systems have proved adaptable, and a common result has been the development of individual land rights – accompanied by the usual patterns of land accumulation by the wealthy, absentee landlordism, tenancy, and

landlessness. These trends have progressed furthest in areas growing commercial export crops, such as Ghana's cocoa regions and East Africa's coffee lands. But they are fast appearing in peasant food-crop areas as well.

The problem of landlessness in sub-Saharan Africa may be most advanced in Kenya, where both the colonial and independent governments have promoted the shift from tribal to private tenure. One-fifth of the country's cropland is in farms bigger than 100 hectares, and the large farms are getting larger. Yet more than half the country's farmers hold just two hectares or less, accounting for under 15 per cent of the total cropland. By the early seventies, nearly one-fifth of rural households were landless. Notes Cohen, "The Kenyan goal of small, relatively prosperous landowning farmers with a stake in a stable capitalistic system and an interest in progressive farming practices is increasingly threatened by the rise of land concentration, exploitive tenancy, landlessness and other patterns which seem to go hand-in-hand with the tolerance of unregulated freehold tenure in the agrarian nations of the developing world."¹⁰

Kenya provides an ominous portent for the rest of black Africa. The population of Africa is growing faster than that of any other continent. Doubling every 25 years or so, it is far outpacing the expansion of cropped area, which increased by only 12 per cent between the early sixties and 1975.¹¹ Increasing land scarcity and competition is inevitable throughout much of the continent, and, in the absence of national policies to control private land accumulation and tenancy practices as well as to slow population growth, Africa will develop the same land-based social conflicts and population inefficiencies that have long been apparent elsewhere.

Worldwide, the number of landless and near-landless people appears to be growing fast. Demographic pressures alone would be enough to guarantee this: despite considerable migration to cities or foreign countries, rural populations are still in many cases growing at close to 2 per cent a year, which would yield a doubling in 35 years. Even where they are feasible, land-settlement schemes cannot absorb more than a small fraction of the tide of potential farmers.

The contribution of population growth to landlessness is often supplemented by other developments within the agricultural economy: land accumulation by better-off farmers; emergency sales of land by marginal owners; the spread of large commercial farms, sometimes foreign-owned; and the eviction of tenants by landowners fearful of tenancy regulations or seeing a chance to profit from the use of new varieties and techniques.

While estimates of the magnitude of these trends toward inequality are not available, recent evidence from Asia in particular suggests that over the last decade and a half of rapid agricultural growth, land concentration has generally increased, boosting the proportion of insecure sharecroppers and landless labourers.¹² At the same time, broader economic policies in most developing countries have not promoted widespread nonfarm employment opportunities that could provide alternative livelihoods for agriculture's dispossessed.

Meeting the "basic needs" of the world's poor has recently become the overriding concern of the international development establishment. Analysis of the postwar development record has revealed that growth in GNP does not necessarily improve conditions for the extremely poor. Most experts have called for a shift in investment priorities toward the rural sector, and toward smallholder agriculture in particular.

Analysis of the growing extent of landlessness, however, indicates that even a small-farm-based development strategy can by-pass or harm the poorest groups, who lack the means to take advantage of agricultural progress. People need assets – above all, land – or assured employment at decent wages in order to benefit from economic growth. In many developing countries today, then, a "basic needs" strategy must include reforms in land distribution and tenancy conditions if the lot of the intended beneficiaries is to be improved.

If current demographic and economic trends are allowed to continue, one billion or more rural residents of the Third World will lack secure access to farmland as humanity enters the twenty-first century. Many of the landless will turn up in the overflowing slums of Third World cities; some will appear as illegal aliens in the cities of richer countries. The malnutrition, illiteracy, poor health, and general powerlessness of those who stay behind will receive frequent comment in UN reports and the global media, while the sporadic violence and more systematic political activism their living conditions spawn will be described as "worrisome instability" by leaders in the world's capital cities. *One way or another, the landless will be heard.*

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