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PHOTOGRAPHS

Peter Willey, a teacher at Wellington College, Berkshire, took the photographs which depict the narcotics trade in Afghanistan.



LAND REFORM

IN THIS issue, Land & Liberty reports the conclusion reached by ecologist Erik Eckholm that, by the end of the century, one billion rural-based people will have no secure access to land. Land reform, then, is a key issue if the problems of a rapidly-growing world population are to be solved in a way that supplies not just basic needs like food – and for millions of desperate people today, that would be regarded as enough! – but also meets the growing aspirations of the poor. A systematic effort at multi-sectoral development has to incorporate a sound programme of land reform. In our next issue, Land & Liberty investigates the successes and shortcomings of some recent attempts at reform, including the efforts of President Ferdinand Marcos (pictured above) in the Philippines. We ask: what conditions are most likely to stimulate constructive change? And we will suggest a model which probably offers the best prospects of success.

HUNDREDS of millions of people suffer from malnutrition. Unknown numbers die daily from starvation.

From this, the conclusion is drawn that there is a demographic problem: overpopulation, defined as too many people in relation to the carrying capacity of earth.

So the main thrust of the work of international agencies is directed at trying to curb fertility trends.

Yet each year, 250,000 acres are lost on the edges of the Sahara, as food-yielding fields are replaced by scrubland and sand dunes. Another 500,000 acres are lost through salinisation and water-logging, due to poor drainage from irrigated fields.

An alternative explanation for this loss of productive capacity, which if correct would require a dramatic shift in policy emphases, is that dysfunctional land tenure systems undermine the ability of huge numbers of people to produce their own food, which consequently leads to the adoption of practices which cause ecological damage.

ECOLOGISTS, where they mention land tenure at all, do so in vague terms. There is, they say, a need for "careful land-use planning."

Rarely, if ever, are we told how this planning compliments attempts to force back the deserts which are expanding in the Americas, North Africa, Asia and Australasia.

The UN Conference on Desertification in 1977 was told that, in Chile, inequitable land tenure patterns promoted ecologically unsound land use. But there is no comprehensive study of how the maldistribution of land directly leads to ecologically-dangerous decisions by individual families and whole communities.

We have no quantitative data on how landlessness – a socially-induced phenomenon – leads to the over-exploitation of land and the disruption of eco-systems.

The hypothesis presented here focuses sharply on the influence of land monopolisation and the motives of the landowning elites.

Because pastoralists lose traditional territories to urban-based land grabbers (although, of course, the maldistribution of tribal land can originate internally), they are forced to over-graze the acres which remain.

Because the enlargement of estates by the political elites results in lower per capita holdings for the peasants, grain farming is extended onto marginal lands that cannot sustain it.

ECO-CRISES & THE LAND TENURE HYPOTHESIS

Table 1:
Per Capita Grain Production in Sixteen Desert Countries,
1950-52 and 1973-75

	Per Capita Cereal Production (Kilograms)		Change
	1950-52	1973-75	
Afghanistan	263	234	-11
Algeria	221	87	-61
Ethiopia	220	190	-14
Iran	182	185	+ 2
Iraq	269	156	-42
Jordan	143	79	-45
Lebanon	44	20	-54
Libya	99	106	+ 7
Mali	267	146	-45
Morocco	272	213	-22
Niger	303	169	-44
Senegal	142	186	+31
Sudan	102	150	+47
Syria	315	241	-24
Tunisia	216	184	-15
Upper Volta	193	180	- 7

Source: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.



● WATER for livestock and domestic use is a major preoccupation on the desert fringes. Here, near the Saharan sands in Kordofan province, Sudan, village cattle are watered. PHOTO: Earthscan/Mark Edwards.

Because incomes are depressed at the margin, people cannot afford to buy alternative forms of energy: so forests are denuded for firewood.

As a result, per capita food production declines (For grain, see Table I.)

THIS IS not a problem peculiar to the Third World, however. A 1976 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development showed how there had been extensive abandonment of farmland in Italy. It noted how

"... it is generally agreed that in Italy 2m hectares have been abandoned in the last 10 years.... the farming methods used on this marginal land have led to deterioration of the soil so that the land was consumed in the literal sense of the term."

For some countries, particularly in the oil-rich Middle Eastern region, the impact of declining food production is disguised by imports. This, however, while partly mitigating the immediate problem of hunger, reduces the awareness of the causes of the problem. And with each passing day, balanced eco-systems degenerate into wastelands.

IN THIS issue, we produce some evidence to support the hypothesis.

Eric Eckholm, now established as a world authority on ecological problems (and who should not be regarded as endorsing the editorial view expressed by *Land & Liberty*), has come to the conclusion that by the end of the century there will be one billion landless people in the countryside. We have hardly begun to think about what might be done about a problem of this awesome magnitude.

Eckholm and Lester R. Brown have stated:

"As agricultural modernization is pursued, governments and aid agencies need to watch carefully the evolution of land-tenure patterns and to insure that the social goals of development are not undercut by the concentration of landholdings and production benefits in the hands of a few. Land in many arid regions is still allocated by traditional tribal criteria; but as land becomes more scarce or

when its value suddenly jumps after it is irrigated, traditional tenure patterns begin to break down. If 'development' entails the emergence of huge mechanized, irrigated farms owned by wealthy individuals or corporations — as it now does in arid northern Mexico — then the welfare of large numbers of people may actually be worsened under the guise of 'progress'."

In another Worldwatch Institute publication, Lester Brown cites a study of Andean countries which noted that wealthy rangers had appropriated the fertile valley floors for cattle grazing, thereby forcing the small landholders to grow their subsistence crops on steeply sloping fields in the hills. This created perfect conditions for severe soil erosion, and impaired the productive capacity of both the mountainside and the valleys!

But Brown, who is President of Worldwatch, nonetheless places demographic pressures at the centre of his analysis:

"Explosive Third World population growth has forced farmers onto mountainous soils without sufficient time to construct terraces. Once the natural cover is removed from untended mountainous land, the topsoil quickly washes into the valley below, silting streams and irrigation reservoirs and canals."

He tells us that, in the Third World, "land is in critically short supply" — a dubious conclusion, given the huge tracts of farmland which is monopolised by a relatively few people, who choose to keep it idle in expectation of capital gains, or who underuse it (as with the *latifundia* of Latin America).

THE PROBLEM is primarily an economic one, which in

**Report by FRED
HARRISON**

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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1. 'Should Agricultural Land Be Protected?', *OECD Observer*, Sept.-Oct. 1976.
2. Erik Eckholm and Lester R. Brown, *Spreading Deserts - The Hand of Man*, Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1977, pp. 32-33.
3. Lester R. Brown, *The Worldwide Loss of Cropland*, Washington DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1978, p. 23.
4. Henry George, *Progress & Poverty*, New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, centenary edition 1979. Especially relevant for our present purpose is Book II.

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:

Turangawae! 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.

BACK NUMBERS can be obtained from 177 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, S.W.1., price 60p. each.

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