

## Book Review

### *Land Reform in Developing Countries: Property rights and Property wrongs*

By Michael Lipton

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Land and its role in human and planetary affairs is a perennial, inescapable and growing dilemma. Of all of the ways this may tax our ingenuity, morality and anthropogenicity, its place in human development through poverty and hunger alleviation and the quest for equity, with due regard to sustainability, must be paramount. Land reform to reduce poverty and gross inequality is the main goal that Michael Lipton addresses in his new book. In so doing it confronts the first and foremost of the United Nations System's MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) to 'Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger' by 2015 which, on present record, is unlikely to even halve the numbers of poor and hungry.

Lipton's work is extraordinary for its coverage, depth and analysis and unquestionably the most authoritative treatise on land reform available. But it is more than that since it requires the reader to consider what attaches us to land as home, food source, livelihood and ecological niche. It is clear that there are many different situations in which reform is needed, and that the feasibility of doing so is dependent on many factors ranging from perceived value, to the nature of ownership and tenure, the historical, contemporary and prospective socio-cultural milieu, the systems of governance available and the political situation. All of these are dealt with in sufficient detail to allow the arguments for the merits of different approaches to be understood and evaluated. For example, the debate about small land-holdings and larger agribusinesses, for food production, is clarified when systematic identification, inter alia, of local resources and needs and of efficiencies and overall productivity occurs and allows the best negotiated 'fit' in the circumstances. The book is by no means prescriptive, but provides analytical frameworks and tools for policy-makers.

What is also impressive is the extent of information about particular localities, be they in Africa, South, South-East or North-East Asia, Meso or South America, Russia or Eastern Europe. This means that it is possible to reflect on changing systems of land usage and tenure in regard to food and human security.

Of particular value is the interest the author displays in the role of science and technology in land reform. Can there be another green revolution or will the next technological step towards food security require a 'blue revolution' where irrigation is far more water efficient and food

plants and animals more water resistant ones? Will, in some way, food production be less land dependent altogether?

There are several major emerging or re-emerging challenges to land equity. First, there is that of the competing pressures on arable land for 'development' for housing, industry, recreation, fuel production (biofuels), mining and even biopharmaceuticals. Then there is the growing food insecurity of the Middle East, India and China because of greater unmet expectations with affluence and because of limited water. There are the 'land grabs' by increasingly more prosperous, but more food insecure countries, of land in poor and poorly governed countries. There are rising food prices because of and as well as those of energy, fertilisers and water; together with financial systems which are speculative and fragile.

Perhaps most threatening of all is that populations will need to move from heretofore food productive areas to new areas because of rising sea levels or the increasing inhospitability of mountainous areas with more torrential rain, mud and rock slides, and loss of traditional land. Taiwan is an example of where land tenure is under threat for both climate change reasons and where fish stocks for a high per capita fish-eating population are threatened both by unsustainable aquaculture (excessive groundwater usage or more frequent typhoons) and less edible fish species with rising ocean or Taiwan Straits' temperatures. The legacy of contaminated arable land from rapid industrialisation in recent history compounds the problem. Curiously, Taiwan has also been a major player in opening up a new kind of real estate, that of cyberspace, but its ability to meet the needs met by land which is now shrinking is questionable, unless by some new intelligence!

Not only is the changing competition for land a source of conflict, but, as "Land Reform in Developing Countries" shows, reform itself may generate conflict. It will increasingly be a joint resource contest about land, water, energy and minerals. It is worth noting that the fertilisers, along with plant breeding, which drove the green revolution, nitrogen from the petrochemical industry as urea and phosphorus are no longer inexhaustible. As a matter of fact, global phosphorus supplies, on which all life depends, are already scarce and its price is a significant contributor to food prices.

These shifting paradigms in land reform are canvassed to varying extents by Michael Lipton. By assimilating his insights, his readers may be able to grapple more effectively with one of the most important matters of our time, land reform

By Mark L Wahlqvist

## Future Events

October 4-9, 2009

19th International Congress of Nutrition 2009, Nutrition Security for All BITEC, Bangkok, Thailand

<http://www.icn2009.com>

**October 11-24, 2009**

*Production and use of food composition data in nutrition (9th edition), Wageningen, The Netherlands*  
<http://www.vlaggraduateschool.nl/eduvlco.html>

**October 18-21, 2009**

*7th Euro Fed Lipid Congress "Lipids, Fats and Oils: From Knowledge to Application", Graz, Austria*  
<http://www.eurofedlipid.org/meetings/graz/index.htm>

**November 5-6, 2009**

*2009 AICR Annual Research Conference on Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Cancer, Washington, DC.*  
[http://www.aicr.org/site/MessageViewer?em\\_id=9401.0&dlv\\_id=12281](http://www.aicr.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=9401.0&dlv_id=12281)

**November 12-14, 2009**

*1st Congress of Fatty Liver and Metabolic Syndrome, Budapest, Hungary*  
<http://www.akcongress.com/>

**December 10-12, 2009**

*4th Shanghai International Congress & Exhibition on Nutrition, Fitness and Health (NFH 2009), Shanghai, China*  
<http://nfh.sstec.com.cn>

**January 28-30, 2010**

*The 1st International Congress on Abdominal Obesity, Hong Kong, China*  
<http://www.kenes.com/abdominal-obesity>

**September 20 – 23, 2010**

*23rd biennial congress of the nutrition society and the 11th biennial congress of the association for dietetics*  
<http://www.nutritioncongress.co.za>