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Food security, farmland access ethics, and land reform

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ABSTRACT

Though reducible by known means, food insecurity remains widespread, with tightening constraints on alternative policies to address it. In this article, we argue that in many developing countries more equal distribution of land is a key, yet often neglected, policy option, and that state-led land reform remains a major, ethically defensible route for addressing food insecurity and related disadvantages. In assessing empirically and ethically redistributive land reform to smallholders, we seek to advance the debate in global food security and to make a contribution to *farmland-access ethics*, that is, the moral evaluation of actions, practices, policies, and laws that affect farmland distribution, allocation, and use.

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1. Introduction

Though reducible by known means, food insecurity remains widespread, with tightening constraints on most alternative remedies. In this article we argue that in many developing countries more equal distribution of land is a key policy option, and that, *contra* the received view, state-led land reform remains a major, ethically defensible route for addressing food insecurity and related disadvantages.

Land reform for smallholders (hereafter LRS) comprises laws to reduce poverty and inequality (and thereby food insecurity) by raising the proportion of farmland controlled by the poor, and thereby their income, power or status. It matters only if it has proved feasible; is not, as many claim, “dead”; and is ethically defensible.

In arguing for LRS, we see our work as a contribution to the global food security debate and to *farmland-access ethics*, that is, the moral evaluation of actions, practices, policies, and laws that affect farmland distribution, allocation, and use. (In philosophical ethics, there is no standard distinction between “ethics” and “morality”, we will therefore use these terms interchangeably.) Our main concern is with the obligations of the state and the limits of state action regarding the interests and rights of individuals and groups.

We hope to sort out normative and factual assumptions behind conflicting positions about LRS as a tool to address food insecurity

and related disadvantages. LRS is controversial; ideological commitments often replace ethical reasoning *and* evidence of consequences. Most agricultural micro-economists believe there is sufficient evidence to back the claim that not-too-unequal smallholdings in developing countries are normally “good” for production, though few macro-economists and policy-makers know this or acknowledge it. Evidence on different types of land reform is rarely examined in the farmland-access ethics literature, which focuses on principled objections to land reform based on the value of property rights (Caldwell and Shrader-Frechette, 1993). Yet the ethical status of land reform, as a route to increase food security, depends on its consequences *vis-à-vis* alternative policies *and* a case-by-case moral evaluation of its permissibility and desirability, despite rights-based objections. Such objections do not justify blanket rejection of state action to redistribute land as *a priori* rights-defeating and therefore morally wrong whatever the consequences. Consequences are not everything, but they too can be the basis of potent rights-based claims. Consequences always matter.

To make our case, we summarise, in Section 2, LRS history and, explicate and defend its main moral goals: reducing poverty and inequality of outcome, increasing equality of opportunity, and enhancing liberty. Of course, we acknowledge that other policy goals matter too: efficiency, stability, and sustainability (Lipton, 2009). Section 3 examines the evidence about the consequences of LRS with respect to its main moral goals. Section 4 explores further the domain of farmland-access ethics by asking whether tenancy, or alternatives to state-led land reform, can achieve those goals.

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Section 5 reviews a deep ethical objection to land reform: that rights-based arguments for legitimacy of incumbent landowners override consequentialist arguments in favour of LRS. Is this moral disagreement intractable? We argue that it is not. One *can* deliberate the permissibility and desirability of LRS case-by-case, but guided by contextually specified ethical norms. We finally explore the implications of our view for restitutive alternatives to LRS.

2. What land reform is and why it matters morally

This section reviews the types, history, and moral goals of land reform (Lipton, 2009). “Classic” land reform sets limits (ceilings) to areas, allowing for quality, that one person or household may own. The vesting authority obtains above-ceiling land (with total, partial or no compensation) and (1) farms it (state farming), (2) distributes it to (non-voluntary) co-operatives or collectives, or (3) redistributes it as individual smallholdings, ostensibly to the farming poor. As a rule, state and co-operative farms have performed badly (although voluntary co-operatives providing services such as credit and marketing often work well (Hazell and Rahman, 2014)). That is partly due to state violence, extraction, or error in redistribution and management, but more fundamentally because farming is ill-suited to joint production or distant management. Farmwork is spread over space and takes much time. Hence neither co-operative/collective farmworkers, nor state farm managers, can readily observe specific actions of a co-worker, let alone their consequences.

In contrast, LRS has proved much more successful, mainly because in low-income developing countries farming is well suited to family/smallholdings. For these, labour screening, search, instruction, and supervision are relatively simple, but unit costs of borrowing and capital management are relatively high. So smallholders use more labour and less capital per hectare than largeholders (Eastwood et al., 2009). In low- and middle-income countries where labour supply is ample and fast-growing, while capital is scarce, smallholders cultivate more intensively, making better use of resources, raising income for employees and for themselves, and producing more per hectare-year. In high-income countries, rural labour is scarcer and savings (hence capital) more plentiful, so that the above argument has reverse effects: the labour-management advantage of small farms is outweighed by the capital-management advantage of large farms, so LRS, while still equalising, tends to reduce output. In the developing world, however, LRS is at least as likely to accelerate growth as to reduce it. Not only farms, but villages, areas, and countries with lower land inequality tend to show faster agricultural progress and overall economic growth (Lipton, 2009:84–86, 104–110).

2.1. What happened

Since 1950, LRS has, directly or through market responses, affected over 1 billion people (Lipton, 2009). These reforms provide substantial extra income from land and farmwork to at least as many, due to rural population growth—even after allowing for transitions out of agriculture, and netting out losers from reform. LRS affected, in succession, Japan, East Asia (not China), much of South Asia and Latin America, and some of Africa.

However, from 1910 to 1980, even more land reform has involved a “terrible detour”. Large landholdings were indeed seized; were often promised, and initially delivered, as smallholdings to the near-landless; but, before such reforms could work, were forcibly shifted to state or co-operative/collective farming. This was imposed, in succession, in Mexico, the USSR, most of Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, and some other Asian, African, and Latin American countries. This hardly ever achieved the poverty-

reducing goal of land reform; as for the equality and liberty goals, wealth, power, and status often passed to a new elite of collective and state farm managers. Further, these big farms proved excellent vehicles for forced extraction of underpriced food, fibres, and timber, helping townspeople but harming the more numerous and weaker rural poor. Only after 10–50 years, and in the worst cases (the USSR and China) after tens of millions of deaths from famine and coercion, were these lands decollectivized. Sometimes (e.g., China 1977–1984, Vietnam, Armenia) this led to small, not-very-unequal farms: the terrible double detour, ending at last in real land reform, was complete.

Today, land reform is often pronounced dead. The story of compulsory state and co-operative/collective farming gives hopes that such “land reform” is indeed dead. However, LRS—alongside supportive investment and policy—has largely succeeded.

In addition, LRS is not made irrelevant by foreign farmland acquisitions (“land grab”). First, most acquisitions are *not* foreign: their extent and impact depend on LRS implementation. Second, in 28 countries comprising 87% of reported cases of large foreign acquisitions, they covered 27 m ha, with 12 m people losing their incomes (Davis et al., 2014): significant, but tiny compared to LRS area and beneficiaries. Third, acquirers cultivate below 15 per cent of land acquired; acquisitions have slowed since 2011 (Cotula, 2015:26). Above all, in 15 cases across Asia, Latin America and Africa, “the most successful cases involved investors who aimed to subdivide and sell parcels for individual family farms” (Byerlee et al., 2015). Land grab in developing countries notwithstanding, the proportion of farmland in small family farms continues to rise (Lowder et al., 2014:9): they favour land productivity *and* income distribution, and both help food security. Land grab makes LRS more important, not less.

LRS is currently active where it has been delayed (Brazil, South Africa), incomplete (the Philippines), distorted (much of the former USSR, Zimbabwe), or partly reversed (Colombia, Bolivia) (Eastwood et al., 2009; El-Ghonyem, 2003). Directly or through market responses (1 billion), or by detour (another billion), land reform has affected 2 billion agriculturists and is still advocated in many developing countries (Lipton, 2009). To evaluate it, we specify its main goals and their ethical grounding.

2.2. Goals of land reform

2.2.1. Poverty and inequality reduction

Some land reformers advocate radically egalitarian *land outcomes*: all land, adjusted for quality, distributed in proportion to household size (e.g., China 1977–84). Most reformers pursue more modest goals such as reducing poverty and gross inequality of landholdings and consequential outcomes (assets, income, power, status, etc.). Such reductions improve food security—more so if due to LRS, which in low-income environments tends to raise land yields (Section 2).

The poverty reduction goal targets low-end inequality (e.g., the GNP share of the poorest or least-landed 15–20 per cent). Thus LRS aims at reducing rural poverty by providing farmland or home gardens to landless labourers or very poor farmers. Poverty reduction is justified ethically even if one values, not lower inequality, but a *sufficiency threshold* for each individual (Frankfurt, 1987).

An inequality reduction goal, instead, requires targeting top-end outcome-inequality (e.g., the income share of the richest 5 per cent) or overall inequality (e.g., a Gini coefficient). This suggests a ceiling: the maximum quality-adjusted land that landowners can keep after reform. Attacking top-end inequalities seeks to reduce elite power (Section 2.2.3) and to release farmland for a broader group than the extreme poor.

Several considerations justify the inequality-reducing goal, but

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