

## **The Influence of Globalization on Land Tenure and Resource Management in Neoliberal Latin America**

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At the end of the twentieth century, globalization and neoliberal economic reforms converge to give priority to capitalist industrial policies and public sector reform above rural land issues. In countries where traditional rural agriculture has played an important role in production and social policies through much of the 20th century, rural land policies are now disappearing from political and economic agendas. Over the past 25 years economic policies in many Latin American countries, and indeed through much of the developing world, have moved toward large-scale infrastructure development, mechanization of agriculture, lowering trade barriers and dismantling public sector monitoring and support agencies. Within this development model, land demarcation and tenure issues for small farmers is compromised as property is further concentrated in the hands of few. These trends are increasingly evident in the fragile environments of the humid tropics, creating a great urgency for prompt attention, while spurring dramatic social and economic changes in the composition of rural populations. Without title to land, peasants sell their labor on the rural market, invade land, farm illegally or migrate. As a result many Latin American countries experience rapid urbanization and international boundary crossings, accompanied by greater impoverishment, landlessness and violent competition for land and natural resources.

With the growing dominance of capitalism and democracy as a global operating standard (Huntington, 1991), the concept of private property lies at the heart of political and economic assumptions (Riker & Weimer, 1995). But while many countries focus on privatizing their state owned enterprises and reviewing foreign ownership laws, surprisingly little attention is directed to the role of small holding settlements in developing countries. Alain de Janvry claimed in 1981 that land reform was dead and that the new politics of agrarian reform lay not in the rural sector, but embedded in the larger political economy debates of production models and social class dynamics (1981: 223). The current rural dynamic is populated by traditional family farmers and capitalist agro-business, with the former group rarely integrated into dominant national economic activities. Politically, capitalist industries enjoy the greatest influence, with the urban poor and rural peasants vying for greater consideration in policy debates (Nelson, 1992).

With the language of land rights and agrarian reform now politically *passé*, these issues are frequently incorporated in discussions of sustainable agriculture, indigenous rights or rebuttals to neoliberal economics. The following survey provides highlights in the development of land-related thinking over the past 25 years. The first section provides an overview of key theoretical debates in economic development and how they relate to property distribution and accumulation. This is followed by a discussion of applied issues in development practice, looking at the role of infrastructure and colonization in changing property patterns and displacing populations. These programs of the 1960s and 70s gave rise to increasing concerns over conservation, environmental degradation and indigenous exploitation, topics covered in the third section of this essay. This discussion will conclude with a presentation of social, economic and ecological dilemmas caused by neoliberal economic policies in rural Latin America, and current attempts to formulate a new model for economic development with social equity.

## **I. Property and Land Tenure in Economic Development Theories**

The history of development theories over the past 40 years reveals a dramatic shift of ideology from protective insulation to market driven strategies. Within these ideologies lie issues of First World/Third World hegemony, social equity versus economic development, and the role of agricultural economies within models of national development and survival.

### ***Structuralism and Dependency Era***

The era of structuralist economic policies, in the 1950s and 60s, was marked by large public subsidies to industrialization projects, wage and price indexing to spur consumption, and a general sense of economic well-being. Productivity during this era focused on stimulating domestic industry in urban centers, and promoting agro-industry for domestic consumption. Traditional agriculture was still important for subsistence purposes, but to the extent that governments promoted agriculture, it was for large-scale export of products such as cattle, cotton or coffee (Grindle, 1980: 3; Williams, 1986). The overall objective of structuralist policies was to reduce or eradicate the need to import products from abroad, thereby reducing international dependency (de Janvry, 1981; Mahar, 1989: 20).

Structuralist policies accompanied dependency theory in seeking to reverse traditional colonial relationships with the First World. These policies sought a regional response to underdevelopment resulting from First World capitalism profiting at the expense of Third World resources and labor surpluses (Bunker, 1985; Dore, 1996; Yapa, 1995). However, import substitution policies served to perpetuate internal hierarchies between the urban industry/agro-industry nexus on the one hand, and non-favored rural production modes on the other. A growing imbalance occurred during this period: jobs were available in privileged sectors and credit was available to selected agroindustrial pursuits but denied to traditional agriculture. Rural producers in this period had the choice of selling their labor to rural employers, migrating to urban jobs, or eking out a subsistence living through traditional agriculture on lands that frequently yielded diminishing returns and were unlicensed, preventing farmers from gaining access to even the meager input credits available (de Janvry, 1981). This attempted insulation from industrialized nations was largely ineffective: in the pursuit of import substitution industrialization policies countries fostered new dependencies upon imported industrial goods and chemicals (Grindle, 1980: 3).

During this same period, the agrarian reform movement began to gather momentum, although it was expressed more in the political rather than the economic realm. Grindle attributes political concessions to agrarian reform to the influence of liberal-minded politicians committed to social justice (Grindle, 1980: 12), and to the growing strength of rural populist movements (1980: 3). However, with the military takeover of many Latin American nations in the 1970s and 80s, these reform efforts began to disappear. In addition to military influence on dampening agrarian reform, Grindle posits that large-scale urban migration during this same period saw many of the most effective leaders leave the rural setting, creating a leadership and organizational void among the remaining dispossessed and impoverished populations (Grindle, 1980: 9). During the final part of the 1970s and into the 80s, rural land policies in many countries were no longer concerned with land distribution, but with increasing the productive capacity of the rural population so as to feed nations faced with growing debt burdens and fiscal crises (Grindle, 1980: 3).

### *Neoliberalism vs. Equity*

Import substitution policies impoverished developing countries. To support the public's perception of growing wealth, governments borrowed heavily until the economic crisis of the early 1980s. When international lenders brought pressure to collect on loans, country after country in Latin America declared virtual bankruptcy. To bailout the near dissolution of several global commercial banks, the International Monetary Fund assumed many developing countries' debts, and thereby gained a new form of influence over these countries (Evans, 1992: 140; Kahler, 1992; Stallings, 1992: 59). Popularly referred to as the "Washington Consensus," this influence or conditionality is summarized by John Williamson (1990) to include: the privatization of state-owned industries, dedication to free markets, reduction and eradication of import tariffs, allowance for market determination of prices, wages and interest rates, and implementation of public sector reform. The expectation was that by shoring up public sector inefficiency and adopting free market economic policies, these countries would export their way out of serious economic crisis, and eventually the fruits of the free market would trickle down to rural and disenfranchised populations.

The shift to export driven market economies has been criticized from at least three vantage points: conservationists, social equity analysts, and some economists. Neoliberal economic policies consistently have been critiqued by the environmentalist community who argue that a blind devotion to market based profiteering would sacrifice natural resources for the sake of export sales and debt reduction. Environmentalists argued that the combination of fragile land tenure systems, ineffective land use regulation, and high levels of poverty and unemployment would lead unregulated capitalists to the predatory consumption of natural resources and the further marginalization of the poor on unsuitable farm lands and dilapidated urban areas (Dore, 1996; Williams, 1986; Yapa, 1995).

But the era of neoliberal reforms also invigorated the conservation community, affording it an opportunity to organize. The environmental movement was on the forefront of anti-dam campaigns, and might be justified in taking some credit for pressuring the World Bank to adopt a slightly "green" vocabulary. However, Elizabeth Dore suggests that environmentalists did not so much define an environmental agenda, as they recast their demands within the language of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's devotion to export promotion and free markets (Dore, 1996: 11). Thus the new environmental solutions fell into a category of "neoliberal conservation," characterized by extractive reserves, global marketing of non-timber forest products and agroforestry of commercial products.

Equity analysts generated another critique of the neoliberal model, particularly in relation to power dynamics and governance. Nancy Birdsall (1990) examines how public sector pressures to become more efficient have traditionally assumed that efficiency and equity were diametrically opposed. However, she argues, inequity inherently causes inefficiency in public sector resource allocation. Stephen Bunker (1985) and Peter Evans (1992) look to institutional weakness and inefficiency to explain why, even if government will support policies to enforce resource regulation, demarcate lands and support the rural poor, the public agencies responsible for this work are both poorly structured and financially impoverished to credibly conduct this work. Evans identifies the paradox of orthodox state reforms in that neoliberalism and structural adjustment seek to streamline the role of the state and cut back on government excess, but rely on those state agencies that are to be reformed to conduct the reform. Although it may be facile to criticize many public institutions in

Latin America, the solution cannot be to dismantle the state, but instead to reconstruct it (Evans, 1992: 141).

Joan Nelson's (1992) analysis of public sector allocation and political opportunism demonstrates that of all of the social groups that may lose from reform (urban middle class, urban labor and rural poor), the rural poor constitute the largest population and their needs are generally the easiest to address from a policy perspective. Their needs for land demarcation, technical extension, and basic infrastructure are easier to provide than the urban pressures for job creation, wage and price stability, security and urban infrastructure (Grindle, 1980: 12). However, because the rural poor generally wield so little political power and influence, their demands are most frequently marginalized and ignored.

A final source of criticism of neoliberal policies derives from economists. Although neoliberal policies celebrate free-market economics, academics increasingly are cautioning that the theoretical model is not leading to any kind of general trickle down effect or debt servicing. Instead, according to Sebastian Edwards (1997), inflation reduction has been moderate and poverty persists, while overall GNP growth has been too low for countries to reverse inequality. In effect, inequality has increased since neoliberal policies have been adopted in many countries. An additional economic concern is the ability of policymakers to implement sound macro-economic policies in the face of pressure to maintain an attractive environment for international investors. Extensive analysis of the Mexican peso crisis, and new observations of Asian economic crises reveal that adopting domestic policies targeted at maintaining international investment can lead countries to keep inflation and interest rates artificially high at the expense of the poor (Gabel, 1996; Naím, 1995).

## II. Applied Issues in Development and Distribution

Criticisms of macro-level political and economic policies generally ignored land rights and demarcation *per se*. But land rights issues have claimed an important part of the political agenda through three separate mechanisms. First, government played an important role in shifting land tenure structures through major infrastructure projects that dispossessed thousands of people of their land and encouraged the voluntary migration of many more. Other government policies sought the political support of landless masses through populist maneuverings and rhetoric supporting direct land distribution or colonization. Finally, securing land rights became a strategy for natural resources management among indigenous populations and other disenfranchised groups.

### *Infrastructure and Displacement*

One component of structuralist era development was heavy funding for major infrastructure projects. These projects included major roadway development, hydroelectric dams, the development of major government owned utilities and oil and mineral exploration. Such infrastructure projects dramatically altered local landscapes through massive flooding, forest conversion and transformation of agricultural lands. These projects pushed some populations off their lands, and pulled many more into previously unpopulated (or sparsely populated) regions. Dramatic population mobility created enormous pressures on land use, frequently resulting in bloody local conflicts (Mahar, 1989; Schmink & Wood, 1992; Swain, 1996a).

Hydroelectric projects throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia caused the most dramatic “push factors.” Designed in federal capitals, these projects flooded millions of hectares of forest and farmland, which were frequently rich in biological resources and home to indigenous and rural producers. According to Cernea and Guggenheim, projects in China and India displaced 38 million people between 1950 and 1990, while projects in Brazil affected 400,000 in the 1980s alone (Cernea & Guggenheim, 1993: 2).

Forced resettlement can create even greater social, economic and environmental damage than the displacement caused by war or natural disaster. Displacement caused by flooding is permanent as populations can never return to their homelands. Moreover, as opposed to voluntary migration where the young, fit and most adaptable individuals frequently choose the “opportunity” to migrate, forced resettlement demands that elderly, sick and less adaptive individuals also move. Finally, remuneration to displaced persons has typically been minimal (Cernea, 1988; Cernea & Guggenheim, 1993).

At the heart of the forced resettlement debate is the extent to which national sovereignty and investments in the public good can displace the private property and livelihoods of a few. How should governments approach this issue of social welfare aggregation? Moreover, what responsibilities do governments have to rural populations when these people may not already have legal land tenure or demarcation? How should governments plan for and manage the resettlement process? Finally, how can policymakers balance the cost-benefit equation when the nation’s development is paid for by the sacrifices of indigenous and rural populations—many of whom will never benefit from the electricity, utilities or wealth that their sacrifices enable?

In 1988, Michael Cernea of the World Bank outlined comprehensive resettlement guidelines (*Involuntary resettlement in development projects: Policy guidelines in World Bank financed projects*). Many World Bank projects were under fire for failing to implement coherent resettlement plans, leaving thousands of people on their own to evacuate their lands, and occupy new regions. This led to dramatic conflicts among indigenous groups forced onto lands occupied by other populations and by peasant squatters. Although Cernea provides guidelines to manage the resettlement process by working with both the mobile community and the recipient communities, he laments that many projects still fail to fully account for the thousands of people displaced by such projects. (Cernea, 1988; Schmink & Wood, 1992: 104).

In contrast to the strong push factor of dams, roads create a “pull factor” for resource hungry developers and the poor. By opening new lands and territories, roads provide access for poor, landless migrants, as well as to resource opportunists seeking logging exploration and cattle ranching. This is particularly the case in the Brazilian Amazon where the opening of major thoroughfares such as the Belém-Brasília Highway in the early 1960s attracted approximately 320,000 people between 1960 and 1970 alone (Mahar, 1989: 12). Similarly, the Trans-Amazon Highway, Cuiabá-Pôrto Velho Highway and smaller feeder roads, constructed over the past 30 years roadways, have enabled millions of families to gain access to previously unexploited resources. (Bunker, 1985; Schmink & Wood, 1992).

Mineral and petroleum exploration have also created imbalanced dynamics. In Brazil the quasi-public CVRD (Companhia Vale do Rio Doce) began mining huge quantities of bauxite, and later developed pig iron smelts which were to be entirely fueled by firewood. The area surrounding

these smelts was quickly deforested, and no sustainable firewood generating scheme had been developed. With the development of an industrial city in the Amazon, huge numbers of poor migrated to be part of the service industry, to try to seize newly cleared lands, and to mine local tributaries and mines for gold (Mahar, 1989: 42; Schmink & Wood, 1992: 87).

In a related dynamic in Mexico, the nationalization of oil fields attracted hundreds of peasants to leave low-yielding subsistence plots to try their fortune and gain stable employment in the petroleum business (Collier, 1994). But after initial booms more laborers arrived than could be accommodated in this industry.

Road and infrastructure policies focused on promoting development, but failed to acknowledge the impact of these projects on resource sustainability and social dynamics. In the 1980s, social movements began to claim a greater voice in protesting the deleterious effects of dams on indigenous populations and the environment. Cernea states that environmental groups are frequently consulted in projects that contain human displacement components (Cernea, 1988: 6). Some governments have designed quite progressive legislation in support of environmental protection. However, most of this legislation will never be enforced due to cost and institutional inadequacies (Grindle, 1980: 16; Schmink & Wood, 1992: 106).

### ***Migration and Colonization***

In addition to the push and pull of infrastructure development, government policies were designed to colonize territories in order to meet goals varying from populating the Amazon for national security reasons, moving people out of the impoverished and drought-ridden Northeast of Brazil, and satisfying reform minded peasant farmers in Mexico.

Brazil offers a vivid and well documented case with which to study the institutional failure and social and environmental devastation of planned colonization. The colonization programs of the 1970s recruited migrants from the drought-ridden northeast, and throughout the country. Promised plots of agricultural lands, and integrated communities of warehouses, schools, healthcare, credit and technical extension, some colonists took the chance. According to Mahar, not nearly as many colonists arrived as was intended. Only 8,000 migrated to official colonization sites in the Trans-Amazon region by late 1970, and only 40 percent of those came from the Northeast (Mahar, 1989: 16). More importantly, those that did come did not stay. The master plan included many mistakes. Communities were distant from commercial markets, thus transportation costs were exorbitant. The technical agricultural components of colonization programs were based on growing upland rice that was unsuitable for the region. The costs of transportation, fertilizer, herbicides and seeds were unrealistic for the migrant population. In addition, bureaucratic complications at banks and credit centers prevented many colonists from seeking the meager rural support credit that was set aside (Mahar, 1989: 27). Finally, the plan made no provisions to prevent colonists from reselling their lands (Bunker, 1985: 172). Quickly an extensive land speculation industry arose in the region.

At the same time that the government sought to “colonize” its poor and needy, it also created incentives for cattle ranching. Through a number of tax and credit incentives, the government encouraged the establishment of large cattle ranches (Hecht, 1992: 12; Mahar, 1989: 13). These ranchers were eager to grab colonist lands, especially after the colonists had completed

the hard labor of clearing the forest. As colonists followed the roads, and cattle ranchers followed them, huge areas of forest quickly fell (Mattos & Uhl, 1994).

In most areas declining agricultural yields forced early colonists to sell their land, but most remained in the region, traveling to growing urban areas or concentrating on more appropriately situated farming lands. This began the squatter phase of land tenure in the region. Some colonists were given conveniently located lands, but they were quickly bought out by wealthy industrial ranchers, and thus were forced further away from major thoroughfares. But access to roads and transportation was always crucial and many migratory families squatted on apparently idle land. Many ranching lands did lie idle as absentee landowners failed to utilize their land. Poor farmers could gain legal title to land if they could prove occupancy and subsistence for seven years. However, institutional difficulties within the land grant agency, and physical threats against peasant farmers on idle farm lands prevented many migrants from securing land title. The migrant farmer, frequently poorly educated, could not pursue the process of arranging for federal agents to conduct site visits, and filing the required legal documents.

While small farmers toiled at low yield crops on tenuous land-holdings, large landowners clear-cut the forest in order to protect their lands from being seized and redistributed. In a short-sighted policy, land usage was defined by federal land agencies according to the criteria that deforestation was a form of land improvement. This prompted many ranchers to clear-cut large tracks of forested property (Mahar, 1989: 49).

Schmink & Wood (1992) provide an overview of the institutional limitations that plagued Brazil's various land management agencies, as does Bunker (1985) and Mahar (1989). The most important element of the story is that while these agencies were trying to orchestrate an extremely complex colonization program, they were being politically manipulated and destabilized. INCRA, the federal agency for colonization and land reform was reorganized no less than five times over 15 years, each time having its jurisdiction and territory redefined. At times INCRA competed with military (GETAT—the Executive for the Araguaia Tocantins Land), and state agencies (ITERPA—Land Institute of Pará State), and, for a brief period, INCRA was extinguished altogether, and then resuscitated (Berardo, Uhl & Verissimo, 1996: 49; Schmink & Wood, 1992: 81 and 106).

### **III. Current Trends in Conservation and Property Management**

By the 1980s, predatory use of natural resources, rapid annihilation of biodiversity, accelerating rainforest conversion and growing rural poverty resulting from unsustainable farming and soil erosion became the focus of international environmentalists. The fallout from major infrastructure projects, industrial development, colonization, and the growth of plantation style agriculture created new stresses on traditional land tenure (Collier, 1994; Dore, 1996; Mahar 1989). Indigenous lands, which most frequently were not demarcated, were being invaded by colonist farmers, loggers and miners. Forest dwelling peasants in the Amazon struggled to preserve their traditional resource use under pressure from cattle ranchers and loggers who were cutting down their livelihoods (Revkin, 1990). Growing concerns for sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry helped to politicize and “green” the farming discourse among environmentalists, if not among farmers. Underlying all of these land use dynamics lay the fundamental issue of land tenure and land security. Without clear territorial demarcation, indigenous groups and forest extractive communities had little ability to defend their territory. Legal land certificates were frequently a

prerequisite for small farmers to obtain bank credit, sorely needed to diversify and modernize their agricultural practices.

### ***Indigenous Dilemma***

The debate concerning indigenous land tenure typically focuses on two distinct questions: first, how to organize indigenous groups to demand and protect land rights; second, do indigenous populations practice sustainable land management, and should they be the rightful stewards of forest ecology?

Land tenure among indigenous peoples has been precarious at best. In Brazil indigenous lands have frequently been invaded by loggers, miners and farmers. Indigenous groups have fought for legal demarcation, but the federal bureaucratic process has been complicated and slow. In Ecuador, Amazonian indigenous populations have taken their battle to a new court. Dissatisfied that the Ecuadorian government was allied with the Exxon oil company against forest dwelling natives, indigenous groups have been organized by international human rights and environmental organizations, and have taken their claim to court in the United States (Kimerling, 1996).

While domestic and international organizations are working with indigenous groups to lobby for territorial demarcation (Davis, 1988), a debate regarding the preferred land management strategies on indigenous lands has occupied anthropologists, ecologists and activists. While all parties agree that demarcation and land regime recognition is required (Gedicks, 1996; Peres, 1994) one side of the debate focuses on whether indigenous groups will naturally choose a careful stewardship management of their resources (Gedicks, 1996; Stevens, 1997). Another group of analysts observed the behavior of past indigenous leaders who, after being granted private control of their lands sold logging and mineral exploration rights to private parties. Peres argues that the granting of land rights to indigenous populations should be accompanied by stricter regulation and maintenance of indigenous and natural resource preserves (Peres, 1994).

### ***Extractive Reserves and Communal Property***

In the struggle to find more sustainable land use strategies in the rainforest, extractive reserves have received much attention as a possible solution. In 1990, the Brazilian government created the first federal extractive reserve under intense pressure from the National Council of Rubber Tappers (Hall, 1996: 96). This new land classification opened the way for forest groups to pressure for federal recognition of their sustainable use of extensive areas of standing forest. However, the extractive reserve model poses several limitations. On the one hand, dependence on extractive reserve management face the difficulties of creating reliable markets and commercialization for forest extractive products (Browder, 1992; Hall, 1996; Nugent, 1996). Another problem is the challenge of managing and protecting communal land, not to mention the difficulty of acquiring federal land recognition of communally managed and owned lands (Bromley & Cernea, 1992; Pineda-Vasquez, 1992). Finally, as John Browder highlights, forest extractive reserves create an interesting model for isolated cases of land management, but do not offer an extensive strategy for rainforest management because relatively little of the population, in Brazil in particular, focus on extractive activities. A far more urgent problem, he says, is to focus on finding stabilizing practices for small farmers and ranchers in the region (Browder, 1992).



### ***Sustainable Development***

A final form of convergence between environmental issues and land tenure concerns sustainable agriculture and agroforestry. Much traditional agriculture has been relatively sustainable though extensive land use practices (Denevan, 1989). Indigenous cultivators in humid tropical regions have applied swidden agricultural practices of annual crops, but have laid relatively unchallenged claim to large tracts of land. Thus deforested areas were small and were allowed to regrow after several years of cultivation. More importantly, forest inhabitants have long practiced sustainable agroforestry by cultivating or managing individual plant and forest species for their consumption, medicinal or trade value (Alcorn, 1990).

As forests shrink through invasion by resource pirates (miners and loggers) and more people struggle on smaller plots of land, extensive agricultural techniques are no longer possible. The predatory extensive practices of loggers and migrant farmers who use up resources in one area and then move on to new resources, create the dynamic for projected resource depletion by the early 21st century (Berardo et al., 1996: 2). Anthony Anderson points out that the problem is not so much one of overpopulation but of unequal land distribution (Anderson, 1990: 9). If equally distributed, most countries in Latin America would be able to provide resources to support their population adequately. But this is not, nor has it ever been, the case. Even in countries that have redistributed land, over generations the landholdings gradually become reconcentrated in the hands of a few (Bunker, 1985; Collier, 1994).

Agroforestry has faced criticism from conservationists. Some isolated groups propose holding natural resources in undisturbed reserves. But this position fails to recognize the permanency of human activity on the land for economic and subsistence purposes. Instead, a growing body of work demonstrates that by applying careful planning and conservation guidelines, tropical forests and other fragile ecosystems can be used sustainably (Anderson, 1990: 11; Berardo et al., 1996; Subler & Uhl, 1990). Sustainable forms of land use are limited, but developing practices for larger populations—“including small farmers and ranchers, as well as private and public companies—has only just begun” (Anderson, 1990: 11). Christopher Uhl has been at the fore of researching sustainable cultivation, pasture recovery and forest regeneration practices among small farmers, ranchers and loggers in the eastern Brazilian Amazon (Berardo et al., 1996; Mattos and Uhl, Nepsted et al., 1990; Uhl, et al., 1991; Verissimo et al., 1992). Other authors have analyzed agroforestry and sustainable development in Ecuador (Peck: 1990) other regions in the Brazilian Amazon (Fearnside, 1990; Browder, 1994; Matheson, 1996; Nugent, 1996; Serrão and Toledo, 1992), and more generally as a model for Latin America (Venator et al., 1992).

Secure land tenure lies at the core of supporting sustainable agriculture practices. Relying upon annual cropping, these practices require longer term commitment to specific plots of land. Farmers are more likely to invest in longer term land use strategies if they feel secure on their land. More importantly, intensive practices require capital inputs in seeds, fertilizers and labor (Subler & Uhl, 1990: 163). However, without land title, small farmers are frequently prevented from qualifying for commercial or public sector credit programs.

## **IV. Critical and Emerging Issues Regarding Land Tenure**

As an independent topic of study, land reform and tenure debates have become completely eclipsed. In his review of the evolution of land problems in the Brazilian Amazon since the 1600s, Roberto Santos writes “had an adequate survey of landholdings been carried out at that time [the late 19th century], many twentieth-century problems would have been avoided. But negligence or incompetence prevented the needed surveying” (Santos, 1984: 450). In her investigation into the disappearance of agrarian reform politics, Marilee Grindle writes that in the early 1970s, the elite realized that agrarian reform was not “necessary for the continued existence of the elite-dominated political and economic order” (Grindle, 1980: 3). And Joan Nelson observes that although services to the rural sector may be easier to provide than those to the urban populations, rural residents do not pose an adequate political threat to justify diverting major resources in that direction (Nelson, 1992).

But while agrarian reform no longer figures in the rhetoric, the issues it originally hoped to address—social inequality, poverty, economic disadvantage and socio-political imbalance—have not disappeared. They have merely mushroomed into more complex and mutated problems. As we cross into the 21st century, the problems take on new names and new meanings, but at their core lie the same seeds that fostered demands for agrarian reform. Now, however, after being manipulated by colonialism, structuralism, neoliberalism and many other “isms” in the name of public policy and academia, the problems become increasingly difficult to identify in basic terms, let alone to resolve.

Urbanization and urban chaos is shifting the landscape of development in countries around the world. More people live in urban centers than ever before, with cities increasing three- to fivefold over the past 30 years and projected to grow another 90 to 160 percent throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America in the final decade of the 20th century (Baker & van der Linden, 1992: iv). This rapid population expansion raises new problems for land tenure in the cities. With urbanization hitting new levels as early as the 1970s, and the enforcement of land rights with military rule, squatting settlements have become the last outpost for many urban dwellers. But in the field of urban design in developing countries new innovations for conceptualizing space and defining land are evolving. Baróss and van der Linden (1990) present important findings and observations of the land tenure dynamics in substandard residential subdivisions from Karachi to Mexico City.

But these problems are not new to the developing Third World. Third World problems parallel the “Third World of the First World.” Slums of the United States and European cities are strongly reminiscent of Mexico City or São Paulo for the squalor and hopelessness of inadequate sanitation and infrastructure, high unemployment and rampant poverty and crime.

Another area of growing concern relates to national security problems when a nation’s natural resources run dry or when countries are overwhelmed by thousands of poverty stricken immigrants and refugees. According to Norman Myer, the new global crises, played out in developing countries around the globe, is one of top soil erosion, loss of water resources, and poor land distribution. When coupled with other political influences these environmental problems are causing massive migration, civil disorders and military disruptions (Myer, 1993: 9). Myer predicts that while “the past forty years have been dominated by the Cold War, the next forty years will surely be dominated by environmental conflicts” (1993: 11). From a global perspective this equates to a world war that we are waging against the Earth (Myer, 1993: 12).

A growing concern of resource scarcity and environmental degradation is the movement of large numbers of “environmental refugees.” First classified as a social outcome of environmental degradation in 1985 (El-Hinnawi, 1985), environmental refugees appear to constitute a growing category of displaced people (Westing, 1992). Although intellectuals debate the merit and meaning of the “environmental refugee” definition, environmental resource degradation is partially responsible for migration from northeast Brazil to the Amazon region (Sanders, 1991), for the immigration of thousands of Haitian citizens to the United States (Catanese, 1990), and for the immigration and ensuing ethnic massacres of thousands of Muslim Bengalis in India (Swain, 1996b). Moreover, growing pressures on host countries are forcing more nations to revise and restrict their immigration policies, as well as the services available to migrants and refugees (Sollis, 1994; Suhrke, 1997; Swain, 1996a).

One common characteristic of today’s land-related crises, albeit a grossly overused, is globalization. Arguably social justice and economic inequality in Latin America have always been influenced by global politics and economics. However, with new technology and economic dynamics “globalization” takes on a new meaning. National boundaries are blurring as global firms wield increasing control over regional economies. Neoliberal reformers are selling state-owned businesses, which nationalistic rhetoric equates with ransoming the patrimony. At the same time, migratory laborers who have always traveled circuits covering hundreds of miles are increasingly including multiple countries in their travels.

Given the global economic and political relationships at the last moment of the 20th century, perhaps it is not unusual that old fashioned ideas like land redistribution fail to capture high rank on political agendas. Today’s concerns are with poverty, economic recession, livable cities and free trade. But all of these issues relate back to the ability and right for individuals to own secure landholdings and engage in economically and environmentally sustainable practices.

Failure to address and protect micro level land tenure in Latin America during colonial and early postcolonial periods has helped to escalate the problem to new dimensions. On a global level the failure of our nations to address new cross-boundary traumas such as global warming, starvation and capitalist practices that prey on natural resources and disenfranchised peoples would lead to greater setbacks in the future. At the Earth Summit in 1992 it was determined that global warming could be addressed for the cost of \$625 billion, which with some weighted mathematics came out to about \$100 per person in developing countries (Meyer, 1993: 7). But all solutions are more expensive than just the financial cost; they also require commitment and discipline. It is a constant spiral of human nature that sadly in matters of protecting our planet and resolving problems of inequality and human misery, we seem sorely unwilling to tackle, even when solutions might be present.