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Assessment the effectiveness of redistributive land reforms in reducing rural inequality, promoting agricultural productivity, and supporting sustainable development

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics, challenges, and outcomes of land reform in various developing regions, with a particular focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The primary objective is to assess the effectiveness of redistributive land reforms in reducing rural inequality, promoting agricultural productivity, and supporting sustainable development. By analyzing historical and contemporary cases—such as those of Mexico, India, Iran, Kenya, and South Korea—the study reveals that successful land reforms typically involve state intervention, redistribution of land to the rural poor, and structural changes in power relations. Results indicate that while some reforms led to notable gains in equity and productivity, others were undermined by political resistance, inadequate implementation, and economic liberalization. Empirical comparisons show higher yields and employment intensity on smallholder farms following reform. However, reforms also face challenges such as land fragmentation, tenure insecurity, and the marginalization of subsistence farmers. The study concludes that equitable land reform remains a vital but underutilized tool for rural development. It calls for integrated policy frameworks that include land redistribution, institutional support, and agrarian justice to address deep-rooted inequalities and support long-term socio-economic and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Land reform, Rural inequality, Agricultural productivity, Sustainable development, Smallholder farming, Agrarian justice

Introduction

Gross inequality in the control of land constitutes a principal obstacle to broad-based rural development in many developing countries. Land reform providing secure and equitable rights to productive land for the rural poor should clearly be a high priority of states and other actors committed to the pursuit of socially and ecologically sustainable development. Nonetheless, there have been few important land reform initiatives during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Moreover, earlier land reform in several countries often had mixed results, with dubious effects on the livelihoods of the rural poor (although some were much more successful than others when judged by this criterion) [1,2]. Land reform, according to Webster's dictionary, means measures designed to affect a more equitable distribution of agricultural land, especially by governmental action. As will be seen throughout this paper, its specific form depends on pre-reform land tenure systems and broader institutional structures, as well as on the political dynamics propelling reform. For our purposes it necessarily includes a redistribution of rights to land from large landholders to benefit the rural poor, by providing them with more equitable and secure access to land. Successful land reform, from the viewpoint of the rural poor, has invariably contained a confiscatory element from the viewpoint of large landholders, who lost some of their previous rights and privileges. When land tenure relations are really altered

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to benefit tenants, landless workers and near landless peasants, it implies a change in power relationships in favor of those who physically work the land at the expense of those who primarily accumulate wealth from their control over rural land and labor [3].
The role of the state in land reform is crucial. In theory, the state has a monopoly over the legitimate use of coercive force within its territory, together with the responsibility to pursue "public good". for all its citizens. Land reform without the state's participation would be a contradiction of terms. Redistributive land reforms can still play a crucial role in relieving rural poverty and in promoting broad-based sustainable development. Increased social differentiation and other concomitants of globalization present new opportunities for significant reforms, as well as obstacles. Contradictions among large landowners about the costs and
benefits of reform are increasing. Peasants have new opportunities to communicate and organize with access to modern transport and communication facilities. They are now in a better position than earlier to find allies among environmentalists, groups promoting human rights and others in civil society as well as from international organizations committed to the promotion of equitable and ecologically sustainable development. Popularly based development strategies that include radical land reforms are not necessarily becoming obsolete. The problem isto organize the social forces able and willing to support them [4].

The Dynamic Of African, Asian And Latin American Land Reforms: Cases

The cases discussed here are from the countries have been involved with land reform issues from the late 1950s. The emphasis is on the roles of the principal actors.

Mexico

Land reform in Mexico was a major political and social effort that began in the early 20th century, especially after the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). The key goal was to redistribute land from large estates (haciendas) to peasants and indigenous communities who had been dispossessed.
The most significant phase occurred under President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), who redistributed millions of hectares through the ejido system—communal land given to peasants to farm but not to sell. This reform aimed to reduce rural inequality and empower poor farmers.
While the reforms improved land access for many, issues like poor productivity, lack of support services, and later policy reversals limited long-term success. In the 1990s, constitutional changes under President Salinas weakened the ejido system, encouraging privatization and market-based land ownership [5].

Guatemala

Land reform in Guatemala was a major issue during the mid-20th century, especially under President Jacobo Árbenz (1951–1954). His government aimed to address the extreme inequality in land ownership, where a small elite and foreign companies (notably the United Fruit Company) controlled vast amounts of unused land.
Árbenz passed Decree 900 in 1952, which redistributed unused portions of large estates to landless peasants. Over 1.5 million acres were redistributed to around 100,000 families. However, this reform angered powerful landowners.
Subsequent land reform efforts were limited and largely unsuccessful, contributing to long-term social and economic inequality [6].

Chile

Land reform in Chile was a key policy during the 1960s and early 1970s, aimed at addressing rural inequality and modernizing agriculture.
The process began under President Eduardo Frei (1964–1970), who started redistributing large estates to peasants and cooperatives. The reform accelerated under President Salvador Allende (1970–1973), who expanded expropriations to promote transformation.
By 1973, about 40% of agricultural land had been redistributed. However, by General Augusto Pinochet, the reform was reversed—many lands were returned to former owners or sold, and promoted privatization.
Chile's land reform left a mixed legacy: it improved peasant access to land temporarily but was ultimately undone by authoritarian rollback and market-oriented restructuring [7].

Kenya

Land reform in Kenya has been a central issue since independence in 1963. Large tracts of fertile land were taken from Africans and given to white settlers, creating deep inequality.
After independence, the government launched land redistribution programs—mainly through a willing-seller, willing-buyer model, purchasing settler land and resettling Africans. However, these reforms often favored political elites and failed to address historical injustices fully.
Efforts continued through various commissions and the 2009 National Land Policy, which aimed to promote equitable access and resolve land conflicts. The 2010 Constitution reinforced land rights, calling for transparent management and restitution.

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Despite reforms, issues like land grabbing, unclear land tenure, and ethnic tensions over land remain major challenges in Kenya today [10].

Colombia

Land reform in Colombia has been a long and contentious process, driven by deep rural inequality.
Efforts began in the 1960s with limited land redistribution through the INCORA agency, but progress was slow and often favored wealthier farmers. Unequal land ownership and displacement fueled violence.
In recent years, land reform became central to the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and FARC. The deal included promises to redistribute land, formalize land titles, and invest in rural development. However, implementation has been slow and uneven, and land disputes, displacement continue to pose major challenges to meaningful reform [11].

South Africa

After 1994, the democratic government launched a land reform program with three main pillars:
1. Restitution – returning land or compensating those dispossessed under apartheid laws.
2. Redistribution – transferring land to black South Africans for farming and settlement.
3. Tenure reform – improving land rights for people living on farms and communal land.
While some land has been redistributed, progress has been slow due to limited support for new landowners, and legal complexities. By 2020, less than 10% of land had been successfully transferred. Debate continues over expropriation without compensation as a possible solution to speed up reform, but it remains economically sensitive [11].

Egypt

Land reform in Egypt began in the early 1950s under President Gamal Abdel Nasser following the 1952 revolution, aiming to reduce rural inequality and break the power of large landowners.
The 1952 Agrarian Reform Law limited land ownership to 200 feddans (about 210 acres), redistributed excess land to poor peasants, and set rent controls. Thousands of families received land, and rural cooperatives were established to support smallholders. While the reform initially improved land access and reduced feudal-style landholding, its impact declined over time due to population growth, limited land availability, and later liberalization policies.In the 1990s, market-oriented reforms reversed many earlier gains, leading to land concentration and renewed rural tensions. Land reform in Egypt today remains a complex and unfinished issue [1].

Korea

Land reform in Korea (particularly South Korea) was a major post–World War II transformation aimed at dismantling the landholding system.After 1945, U.S. military authorities and later the South Korean government implemented land reform laws (1948–1950).
Large landowners were forced to sell land above a set limit to the state, which redistributed it to tenant farmers.By the early 1950s, most tenant farmers became landowners. This reform significantly reduced rural inequality, boosted agricultural productivity, and laid the foundation for South Korea's later economic development. In North Korea, land reform was more immediate, with all land expropriated and redistributed by the government in 1946. Private ownership was later abolished entirely.Overall, Korean land reform is considered one of the most successful in Asia [1].

India

Land reform in India began after independence in 1947 to address rural inequality, reduce exploitation, and improve agricultural productivity.
The key objectives were:
1. Abolition of zamindari system – ending the power of landlords.
2. Tenancy reforms – securing rights for tenants and sharecroppers.
3. Land ceiling laws – limiting the amount of land one could own and redistributing surplus to the landless.
4. Land consolidation – grouping fragmented landholdings for efficiency.
While these reforms achieved some success—especially in states like West Bengal and Kerala—overall progress was uneven due to poor implementation, loopholes, and political resistance. Land inequality and disputes still persist in many regions [12].

Iran

Land reform in Iran began in the 1960s as part of the White Revolution, a series of modernization efforts. The reform aimed to break the power of large landowners, reduce rural inequality, and gain support from peasants. Large estates were divided, and land was redistributed to millions of tenant farmers. By the early 1970s, a significant portion of agricultural land had changed hands. While the reform weakened the traditional landlord class and gave land to many peasants, it faced problems: many farmers received small, unviable plots and lacked support like credit and infrastructure.

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Productivity gains were limited, and rural dissatisfaction remained.As well as, land reform successfully transferred the ownership of land cultivated by the tenants to the tenants and thus radically transformed the nature and structure of landownership in Iran [13].

Sri Lanka

Land reform in Sri Lanka began in the 1970s to address land inequality and promote social justice.
Under the Land Reform Law of 1972 and a 1975 amendment, the government limited private land ownership (first to 50 acres, then 25 acres), taking over excess land for redistribution. Much of the acquired land, however, belonged to plantations and was transferred to state-run corporations rather than directly to small farmers.
While the reform reduced the dominance of large estate owners, it had limited success in empowering rural peasants due to poor implementation and lack of support services.
Land issues in Sri Lanka remain complex, especially in relation to ethnic conflict, resettlement, and post-war land disputes [14].

Results and Discussion

There are signs indicating that in many developing countries, land ownership has become more concentrated in the past decade. This is all the more significant, as in developing countries, the large majority of the population derives its income from farming. Land reforms are needed to ensure a more equitable distribution of agricultural income. For a long time, assistance to agriculture in developing countries concentrated on improving seed and fertilizer supplies, irrigation, and plant protection. Technical measures to raise yields do indeed play a vital part in the development of rural areas, but they are often insufficient to eliminate unemployment, poverty, and hunger. They should be supplemented by social changes, and in particular land reforms to remedy defects in the pattern of agriculture. This view is reflected in the World Bank's repeated proposals for a reorientation of development strategies. Given the fact that the concentration of property and control over land is the main source of political influence in non-industrialized societies, land reforms also imply changes in the existing balance of political power. It's therefore not surprising that, owing to the resistance of the usually influential land-owning class, most attempts to tackle land reforms were confined to legislative activities. At the same time, a large part of the third-world land reforms are now more urgent than ever before. A number of indications support this view. Information available for Asia, which suggests that land ownership has actually become more concentrated in the past decade, probably applies to other regions with a similar pattern of agriculture as well. This is all the more significant as in developing countries the large majority of the population derives its income from farming. In spite of industrialization, this is unlikely to change very much in the foreseeable future, although the share of rural population in total population will decline from 60% to 52% in the decade ahead. In absolute terms, the rural population will grow by an average of 1.4%, i.e., by nearly 200 million people a year. These additional people will have to be fed and employed ([15].
The food and employment problem are unlikely to be solved by further encouraging the already rapid migration from the land to the cities. Estimates for selected countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America suggest that, given the present sectoral pattern, annual growth rates in real gross domestic product of 9 to 11 percent would be required to employ the additional labor force totally outside the agriculture sector. Agriculture itself can absorb the additional labor force only to a limited extent, given present conditions of ownership and management. In most developing countries, the bulk of productive farmland is still owned by a minority of landowners, since there are virtually no medium-sized holdings, and land suitable for cultivation is getting increasingly scarce.
The growing population pressure often concentrates on holdings which are capable neither of producing a profit nor of feeding those dependent on it. This trend has caused a rise in the number of landless peasants, increased inequality in income and wealth distribution, more overgrazing, and a drop in soil fertility. All three developing regions—Asia, Africa, and Latin America—share the sometimes extreme impoverishment associated with increasing rural population pressures.
But if efforts aimed at accelerating development are to have an impact on the bulk of the population, they have to take into account not only pushing up overall economic growth and employment, but also greater justice in distribution. Though there can be no a priori certainty that efforts to achieve more justice in distribution will not affect competing aims such as increasing yields per hectare, any negative effects—if at all—are likely to be short-term. A productivity comparison for an extended period before and after a reform shows that, in the long run, land reforms improve productivity.
Admittedly, comparisons of this kind are difficult. The more long-term the land reform and the more marginal the changes involved; the less clear-cut is the demonstrable effect on agricultural productivity. Yet, there are plenty of signs that land reforms have a positive productivity effect. As regards cereals, the rise in yields per hectare in countries with major land reforms—such as Egypt, Chile, Kenya, Korea, and Taiwan—over the period 1948–52 to 1968–72 was higher than the respective regional average.
In the 1960s, these countries were able to push up their yields per hectare by more than 3 percent a year. This was much more than the average for all developing countries, 1.3 percent. Similarly, positive productivity effects were diagnosed in Mexico and Pakistan. Comparisons between farms of different sizes provide further indications of productivity effects of land reforms. Thus, in 1966–67, rice yields per hectare in Sri Lanka—a country with predominantly small holdings—were notably high. In 1966–67, the average size of holding was 1.6 hectares. On farms with a productive area of up to half a hectare, yields were on average 9 percent higher than those for larger holdings.

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Productivity comparisons for the Philippines and central Thailand are even more favorable to small holdings. And in selected Latin American countries, yields per hectare for the smallest holdings were up to 14 times higher than for the largest ones [16].

The higher per-hectare productivity stems from labor-intensive cultivation. In the Indian state of Punjab, for instance, the average per-hectare labor input in 1968 for holdings below 12 hectares was two-thirds higher than for larger holdings. In Colombia the per-hectare labor input for small holdings (under 0.5 hectares) in 1960 was nearly 16 times that for large holdings of 500 to 1,000 hectares. Estimates for Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala indicate that the number of agricultural workers per hectare in each case was, on the smallest farms, 30 to 60 times greater than on the largest ones. However, the positive employment effect of redistribution of land is associated with a drop in the productivity of labor. More important, however, is that income generated in agriculture is more evenly distributed than before [17].

Conclusion

If a change in the pattern of ownership in developing countries is accepted as one of the prerequisites to higher productivity, relief of the employment problem, and more justice in distribution, the following measures, among others, are called for:

A reduction in the size of large holdings,

An allocation of fertile land to landless peasants,

An increase in the size of unprofitable family-run farms, Subsistence farming,

An elimination of unsatisfactory tenancy agreements through lowering rents and increasing security of tenure,

The introduction of progressive land taxes,

Availability of credit on favorable terms for smallholders and tenants,

More joint action on a cooperative basis,

Establishment of a proper system of land registration, without which land reform cannot be put into practice.

The measures needed to introduce land reform have to be adjusted to the existing circumstances. So different solutions have to be considered according to the socio-economic background. Thus, Asia's farming system—characterized by land-owning smallholders and big landowners whose land is cultivated by small tenants—calls for a kind of land reform different from the system in Africa south of the Sahara, where the land is in tribal or communal ownership, or that of Latin America, where the overwhelming share of the land is held by large landowners and farmed mainly by agricultural workers.

In relatively thinly populated regions like Latin America, conditions for increasing the size of unprofitably small farms are more favorable than in populous areas. This shows that some aspects of land reform go beyond the agricultural sector.

The provision of food and employment for people requires flanking measures in other economic sectors if a relatively even distribution of land cannot produce economically viable farm sizes.

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