

# THE SUSTAINABLE, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PROCESS OF LAND REFORM

*Prof. Richard K. BULLARD, United Kingdom*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper looks into the need for spatial information to achieve sustainable, economic and political support when undertaking the process of land reform. Inevitably the land reform process will be influenced by the economic and political factors but the process must be undertaken so as to achieve sustainable development and food sufficiency based on results derived from spatial information.

The land reform process, where it is applied in developing countries and countries in transition, is influenced by the political manifestations of the ruling political party before it gained power. The expectations of the electorate are therefore expecting to acquire the land and the resources they were promised and which they have been informed they illegally lost or were denied in the past. The reality that then faces the government in power is that by implementing their manifesto there might be uncertain economic consequences, shortage of food due to the creation of uneconomic land parcels, the loss of commercial farms, and the eventual environmental deterioration because sustainable and viable economic conditions cannot be achieved.

The need for reliable spatial information to explain the consequences of proceeding with a political manifesto will be required. The benefits derived from land reform would ideally be for the majority of a population rather than the minority in power.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The process of land reform is one in which there requires to be a wealth of spatial, legal, economic, and food related information to justify the process before implementation. To be successfully introduced the process must be acceptable to the people of a country, this would in practice mean the ruling class which is usually the party in power.

There will inevitably be a conflict between the priorities of a ruling political party and the aspirations of their citizens. While the political party in power convinced their electorate, especially at the time of independence of its intention to distribute land and resources, the situation and time will change and reality will show that promises cannot be kept.

In an ideal situation the wealth and consequently the major resource land would be equally divided allowing every family the opportunity to grow sufficient food for their own needs

and a surplus to provide income for other expenses. The real situation in the world is such that the ideal does not occur and an increase in population and resultant reduction in arable land per family unit, the self-sufficiency model, cannot be achieved, all other issues being considered.

Any changes that are introduced with regard to land distribution must be fully investigated before action is taken; this means the collection, analysis and presentation of results to justify the action to be taken.

## **2. LAND REFORM**

It is usually understood to be the process whereby land is distributed for the benefits of the society of a country and or a community. By implication it often implies that the land is being given back to those who have 'lost' or denied ownership of the land at some time in the past. It usually takes place at the timing of certain events such as independence or a change of political party, especially when following on from a dictatorship to a democratic government.

The United Nations undertook a number reviews on land reform in the 1960s and 1970s and produced Reports which on reflection today can be considered by many as being insensitive, disruptive and violence provoking in their aspirations of those seeking change. It is suggested that the following could be considered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as disruptive action provoking and not worthy of a world body that promotes peace (UN 1970).

The main thrust of the UN suggestion to express demands was as follows:-

- Internal strengthening of the political organisation after rallied support around specific demands.
- Massive demonstrations to express the force of the political bargaining power of the peasantry.
- Civil disobedience and the peaceful occupation of lands by large numbers of the peasantry.
- Strikes on rural estates or plantations by agricultural workers.

In 1970 it was suggested by the UN that none of the above actions had taken place. There was no perception by the UN how these action provoking statements could be interpreted in the following 30 years or that the break down of the Colonial Empires including the Soviet Union would continue at the pace it did.

While those in developed countries can accept that provided there is sufficient land on which to build a house, property to rent and employment in an urban area that land reform is of little concern. In the developed world, however, with an extreme shortage of employment in urban areas, majority of population still living in rural areas, with income if any derived from the land, then land reform becomes an issue of major concern.

Extreme examples of land reform are occurring in Zimbabwe at present some 20 years after it gained its independence. It is suggested that the action being taken has tarnished the world's perception of land reform especially as there is limited condemnation of the extreme action being taken. With sufficient spatial information it could be clearly be indicated whether the action being undertaken could be justified in a sustainable, or economic sense, even though it might be of short-term benefit in the political sense. .

The benefits of land reform are difficult to quantify even if the implementation of the process itself can be justified. The following sections attempt to quantify the process of land reform with regard to its viability, especially the sustainable nature of the actions that are involved.

For countries in transition, as happens in many of the former Soviet Union, "the current and future process of land distribution must be determined to ensure that land will be used to its optimum benefit for the citizens of Georgia. With over half the labour force working in agriculture it is important in the short term that this figure is retained to prevent further increase in unemployment and to prevent migrants leaving the land and increasing the numbers of unemployed in the towns and cities" (Bullard .2000a)

"Of concern is that of the more than 2.5 million people who live off agricultural activities there exists only between 30,000 and 40,000 farms that could be categorised as commercial (Republic of Georgia 1999b). The majority of farms are of a subsistence nature and as such are vulnerable to changes in production costs and revenue from agricultural produce".

The above example clearly indicates the impact of land reform where land formerly owned by the state is redistributed to the community, with preference to those in positions of influence, so that the problems of rural inequality are already being introduced during transition.

### **3. ECONOMICS OF LAND REFORM**

The financial cost of land reform is usually beyond the resources of a developing country, certainly if the activity is to be achieved over a relatively short space of time. The involvement of outside agencies providing grants, or more likely loans, will fund the process, but such action must be questioned to ascertain if servicing the debt is more costly than the inevitable long-term process with self-funding?

Some countries allocate a percentage of their budget for land reform activities. This mainly involves the purchase of land from one sector of the community for distribution to another. In simplistic terms this is the purchase of commercial farms and breaking them up into peasant holdings. Results of this process in Africa shows that many of the holdings cannot be considered economic, that is, they do not provide a viable income for the family residing on the holding. While it can be questionable if the commercial holding was economically viable, without doubt the peasant holding is unlikely to achieve economic status.

The result of creating peasant holdings is for the states to continue to subsidise the process which includes the provision of food for the foreseeable future. In economic terms this situation is not sustainable and environmentally can be disastrous. The assumption that those who are receiving the smallholdings have sufficient farming knowledge and experience is usually incorrect. Experience has shown that many of those accepting the holdings do so reluctantly and would prefer to remain in an urban area awaiting the prospect of employment.

For many in developing countries the perceived need for land ownership is more important than employment. The allocation of uneconomic holdings could only be sustained if the farming activity was subsidised by full time employment as occurs on many small farms in developed countries.

#### **4. POLITICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF LAND REFORM**

The agenda of all political parties is to promise the electorate what it aspires even though their slogans may never be achieved. The promise of land, especially when a country receives its independence after many years of colonial rule is without doubt the most commonly heard political offer.

While the political aspirations of a population might be for land reform before they achieve their independence the reality for the politicians after this event might then be out of step with the electorate who are not aware of the economic consequences of enacting the slogan.

The use of land reform statements in the political manifestations can only be acceptable if the appropriate action takes place. While a minority owned the majority of the land area before independence the trend is that another minority will be the major owners in the future. While this is acceptable in the developed countries through the democratic market economy it cannot be acceptable in one party states manipulating the situation to party members advantage.

The past inequalities in the developed world should be considered and reasons for their action noted. The Enclosure Acts in England where common land was enclosed by the authority of Acts of Parliament took land from the majority to create large estates then owned by the minority. At the time this was exploitation by legal means against the majority, different to the situation currently in many developing countries. It also occurred at the time of the Industrial Revolution where employment in factories replaced many of those working on the land. As the majority in England now have employment in urban areas with sufficient land on which to build their homes, the actions of the past have faded into the realms of history. In the USA with 93 per cent of the land being owned by 5 per cent of the population the inequalities could be likewise be stated, except the need to own land for income is no longer so valid in a service orientated society.

Unfortunately in most developing countries the majority still live in rural areas and derive their income from the land, therefore the issue of land ownership still remains a major political issue.

## **5. SPATIAL DATA FOR LAND REFORM**

The process of land reform should not proceed until the necessary information base has been designed and the information collected, analysed and presented to the politicians for implementation. Without a sound argument based on reliable data for implementing a land reform project a government, and particularly the political party in power, will not accept the proposed activity.

What need to be spelt out quite clearly are the sustainable benefits that will accrue from implementing and the disadvantages of taking other decisions or by not taking any action at all.

The spatial data that is required will include some or all of the following:-

- Cadastral surveys which indicate legal boundaries.
- Topographic maps and plans required for the development process.
- Land use maps and plans with access to digital data from which they are derived, aerial photographs and remote sensing imagery.

In addition to the spatial data above there needs to be legal and economic data that can be referenced spatially to each land parcel being included in a land reform project.

- Land ownership as recorded in a land registry office.
- Legislation relating to land parcels including planning and other restrictions.
- Economic returns.
- Valuations of land and real estate.
- Tax schedules including property, road and others.

Additional sets of data will be required which will provide information to establish the food security of a country. The European Union (Bullard 2000a) monitors the food security issues in many transition and developing countries with land reform as one of the priority activities.

- Food supply including locally produced, imports and value of surplus exported.
- Cost of living, GDP and affordability of to the citizens.
- Self-sufficiency in food production and measures and consequential action required to retain this status.
- Population statistics.

From the above sets of data, spatial, economic, legal and food the viability of future land reform projects can be undertaken. With well stated arguments derived from the data sets the politicians should be in agreement and hopefully willing to proceed.

## 6. SUSTAINABLE PROCESS OF LAND REFORM

The proposal to implement land reform should go in parallel with the implementation of a sustainable audit.

For the definition of sustainability a quote by Tickell (1995) in a paper to the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, as "durable change for the better while protecting the earth we will bequeath as well as the earth we inherited" would be appropriate for land reform projects.

The following list indicates the priorities that should be considered for implementing a land reform project. It must be noted that land reform is an ongoing process, without end, and even though a major project would be undertaken this would only be the first of many such schemes and other minor activities will take place.

- Consider the needs of future generations when implementing land reform.
- The method of land reform that is introduced should ideally suit the long-term needs for sustainable development as well as benefiting the market economy.
- The spatial, economic and legal data would form the base plane of a LIS and other planes to support sustainability should be built upon it.
- The collection of multiple sets of data at the same time can lead to cost savings and assist in achieving appropriate interpretation to assist the process.
- Monitoring the extraction of resources during land reform can help to avoid their exploitation and lead to the reclamation of land disturbed during the process.

To be sustainable the priorities will be those expounded by the UN, the need to adequately feed, house, and clothe the population in the light of changing circumstances.

Two major factors that must be taken into account is the rate of increase in population and the arable land area per head of population. The population will most likely increase unless appropriate measures are taken as occurs in countries like China and Indonesia. The arable land area per head of population is likely to decrease with resultant loss in agricultural yield unless the green revolution can be continued and expanded.

Land yield cannot be sustained unless the appropriate sustainable practices are implemented. Arable land loss will occur likewise unless desert encroachment and other environmental impacts are prevented.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The conflict between the political and practical undertaking of land reform centres around the fundamental aspiration of people to own land, especially those persons in developing countries who are landless. The "love of land at any cost" could be the downfall of the economies of many developing countries especially when a food self-sufficient country can quickly become dependent on foreign countries to provide emergency food or funds to

purchase. While this example can have the retention of political power as its objective the result is indiscriminate land distribution which cannot benefit anybody.

As stated above land reform is an ongoing process which will have no end. Leaving the decision to implement a land reform project to politicians should not be undertaken without presenting them with well designed proposals derived from and reliant on spatial information.

The sustainable process should be adopted to ensure that future generations would have the resources at their disposal that present and past generations have had. The land reform process will need to be an ongoing process with the appropriate government department, adequately staffed, and presenting politicians with well designed proposals based on reliable spatial information.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

A freelance consultant and part time Reader in the Department of the Built Environment at Anglia Polytechnic University (APU). Started surveying career in Zimbabwe and to date has worked in 38 countries. Completed Masters in Engineering by research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and doctorate at Sheffield University. Worked in many of the activities of surveying including, cadastral, engineering, land management, photogrammetry, remote sensing, and topographical. With FIG as a former national delegate and as Secretary of Commission 2 (Professional Education) and currently corresponding member of Commission 7 (Cadastral and Land Management). An RICS APC examiner and Member of Geomatics Faculty Board and Executive. With the European Faculty of Land Use and Development and is a Professor in *Systemes d'Information du Territoire*. Main interests in consultancy and research include land

reform, land management, land consolidation and coastal zone management. Particular interest in the multidisciplinary aspects of land development for countries in transition and in the developing world. Is the author of books, chapters and publications in the above fields of activity.

## **CONTACTS**

Prof. Richard K. Bullard  
Department of Built Environment  
Anglia Polytechnic University  
Chelmsford, Essex UK  
UNITED KINGDOM  
Tel. + 44 1245 233 351  
Fax + 44 1245 233 751  
Email: Richard.bullard@cwcom.net  
Web site: <http://www.anglia.ac.uk>