

**Paper for the International Conference on
Agrarian Reform and Rural Development**

**Date: 7 to 10 March 2006
Location: Porto Alegre, Brazil**

**Title of the Paper: Land reform policies in Brazil: Confusion over
different meanings attached to land**

Authors: Carmen Lindemann (PhD Candidate)
Dr. Violeta Schubert

Institution: The University of Melbourne, Australia

Department: School of Anthropology, Geography and Environmental Studies
(SAGES)

Date: 01 February 2006

SUMMARY

This paper reviews contemporary development discourses on the relationship between access to land and land conflicts. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the importance of examining the history of access to land in the South region of Brazil, in order to better understand the factors affecting land conflicts. Underlining the arguments presented, a key hypothesis is that confusion arising from different meanings attached to land is a major factor that exacerbates conflicts over land.

The case study of land reform in the South region of Brazil is of particular significance because of its agrarian, social and political contexts, in which political instability in this region impacts on the broader national economy. Further, land conflicts are ongoing in the South region despite the implementation (even if it is a partial implementation) of rights-based approaches to land reform. Although the distinction between different types of land reform is not clear cut, the focus here is not so much on land reform approaches that emphasise tenure, legal, legislative or economic reforms, rather, the main concern here is on land reform policies that are based on people's rights, and claim to promote social justice.

Land reform policies: Confusion over different meanings attached to land

Introduction

A significant assumption among development theorists is that there is much congruence between societal progress and issues relating to land, particularly land reform strategies and societal reforms. Modernisation theories have examined land reform as a strategy that has been used to relocate unemployed people and workers who were displaced through industrialisation. In this context, agriculture was only important in so far as it supported industry and promoted economic growth, and land reform programmes were aimed at increasing productivity in commercial agriculture and promoting export economy.

From another perspective, during the 1960s, the United States pursued the implementation of land reform in Latin America as an attempt to promote liberalisation in the continent, and to prevent the spread of the Cuban Revolution. The Kennedy administration created the Alliance for Progress in 1961, with the goal of increasing the standard of living in Latin America, and promoting American principles and values, such as freedom, justice and trade. According to North American foreign policy during that period, it was essential to ensure political stability in Latin America because threats to landed power were perceived as threats to good trade relations. However, in practice, efforts of promoting the Alliance for Progress were overshadowed by increased reliance on right wing and military governments in Latin America, because it was a means of maintaining political stability in the region. Some scholars argue that such tensions between pragmatic and idealistic concerns ultimately doomed the objectives (c/f Stratton 1998: v). Nonetheless, the significance of the Alliance for Progress, in connecting the concepts of land reform with societal transformation, or the ‘Americanization’ of Latin America, cannot be disputed. Further, the Alliance for Progress brought to the foreground ideas about social justice as being intricately linked to land reform, and contextualises what is now commonly referred to as rights-based approaches to land reform.

Contemporary discourses on development and perceived reasons for land conflicts to be ongoing

The purpose of this review is to highlight the various arguments about the reasons for land conflicts to be ongoing in developing countries, particularly in Brazil. Further, the themes that emerge from this review illustrate the importance of better understanding agrarian issues and their relation with broader socio-political and economic processes. The fact that land conflicts continue to be problematic in various developing countries is of particular concern to development.

Various local authors in Brazil argue that land reform activism and political instability are promoted by specific stakeholders and actors who benefit from the exacerbation of land conflicts. For example, Navarro (2002) suggests that the Rural Landless Workers Movement (MST), which is one of the most influential stakeholders within land reform activism in Brazil and at the international level, emerged as a social movement but has been transformed into an organisation, dependent on fostering ongoing conflict to obtain external funding, visibility in the national and international media and continue to influence government policy. Likewise, the leaders of social organisations are thought to be the main benefactors of land reform programmes, at the expense of the people who these organisations claim to represent.

From an economic perspective, it seems that rights-based approaches to land reform have not, as yet, provided the conditions for people who receive land to become competitive small-scale producers. Various authors argue that multinational agribusiness maximizes the profits of US exports on fertilizers, chemicals, farm machinery and agricultural equipments, at the expense of local human subsistence. The re-conceptualisation of agriculture as agribusiness has resulted simultaneously in the overproduction of food and an increase in levels of hunger and rural poverty (c/f Magdoff, Foster and Buttle 2000). Further, Lewontin (2000) distinguishes between farming and the agrifood system, in which the latter is perceived as incorporating much broader activities than farming, including production, transportation and marketing of farm products. As a result, current agricultural production processes have reduced the level of control of local farmers and resulted in their alienation in relation to agricultural markets (c/f Lewontin 2000). Although some farmers may still have ownership over land, it seems that this ownership is of decreasing significance.

Other pervasive arguments consider tenure arrangements and agrarian structures to explain the reasons for land conflicts to be ongoing in Brazil. Unequal agrarian structures are generally perceived by scholars who argue that social agents are products of social processes (e.g. modes of production), as major causes of social, political and economic inequality, producing and reproducing poverty. For instance, Kay argues that Latin America's potential for rural violence is largely rooted in its unequal and exclusionary agrarian socio-economic system (2001: 770). Nonetheless, even authors that support the proposition that countries with unequal agrarian structures are more likely to experience violent rural conflict recognise that the relationship between land tenure systems and violence is far from direct and immediate. Kay argues that there are multiple and evolving causes of violence and that "an important first step towards dealing with rural violence entails resolving the land question so that landless and poor peasants can gain access to sufficient land and economic resources to ensure a sustainable standard of living and proper participation in society (i.e. through further democratization of social and political systems)" (2001: 770). Although much of the land conflicts in South America have been associated with the presence of unequal agrarian structures, lack of institutionalisation, and deficient political and legal channels through which various social groups can pursue their claims, these factors are not sufficient to explain the emergence and persistence of land conflicts in the South region of Brazil.

For instance, structural inequalities are particularly evident in the North-east region of Brazil, characterised by large land-estates, sugar-cane plantations, and processes of concentration of land ownership which seem to be congruent to tendencies of concentration of wealth and inequality. In this context, significant areas of land have been left unproductive or idle and serve as an impetus for the emergence of social tensions and land invasions. It is stated in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 that idle land does not serve a social function and is subject to expropriation and re-distribution through land reform. Therefore, rural social movements mobilise landless peasants throughout Brazil to invade lands, exacerbate conflict to pressure government agencies to implement land reform strategies, and claim a more egalitarian redistribution of land, based on the notion that land serves a social function.

However, a focus on agrarian structures and institutions is not sufficient to explain the emergence and persistence of violence in the South region of Brazil. The South of Brazil is characterised by the most egalitarian agrarian structure of the country, with Gini coefficient of 0.66, relatively lower than 0.81 in the North-east region (CEPAL 2000). The Gini coefficient is usually used to measure levels of concentration of land ownership. Further, legal, social and

political institutions are considered to be amongst the most inclusive within the country, referred to as “progressive, democratic and participatory”, particularly in the city of Porto Alegre (Chavez 2004: 2). Therefore, it is of significant concern to development studies, in terms of equity and productivity, that land conflicts are ongoing in what is considered to be one of the most developed regions of the country.

What emerged from this review is that various social tensions and anxieties are generated precisely because there are multiple meanings attached to land (e.g. resource, means of production, capital, territory, identity, heritage, agriculture, subsistence, environment and property). The multiplicity of meanings attached to land results in fluidity and ambiguity of interpretations about land, which often leads to conflictual understandings of the ways in which people are connected to the land and land use. Given that in the South region of Brazil, access to land is primarily viewed by rural social movements as a means of fulfilling people’s rights and promoting social justice, it is likely that the perceptions of the people at the grassroots level are not necessarily compatible with the perceptions of the people who rural social movements in the South region of Brazil claim to represent. The fact that land conflicts are ongoing even in areas which have undergone rights-based approaches to land reform is of particular concern to development studies. Rights-based approaches to land reform have not fulfilled the expectations of the people in the grassroots level (i.e. peasants and landless peasants) and promote meanings attached to land which relate to the interests of specific stakeholders, actors and donors of land reform and development projects.

Social and historical context of the South region of Brazil

The selection of the Southern region of Brazil as the key research site is based on several factors, including the national significance of agricultural production of this region, high levels of political participation, social mobilisation and rural organisations, and the fact that ongoing land conflicts and political instability are particularly problematic in a region which is typically characterised in development terminology as the most ‘developed’ in the country, productive and egalitarian. It is also in this region where the most significant rural social movements emerged, such as the Rural Landless Workers Movement (MST), advocating land invasions, occupations, and rights-based approaches to land reform.

The significance of the South region of Brazil and its role within the national economy and society is highlighted through broader historical processes. Cardoso (2000) argues that particular structures and social relations which emerged in the South region of Brazil are rooted in the colonial period. Historically, the local economy and society in the South developed to supply other regions with food and transport (i.e. cattle and horses), based on cattle ranches and agricultural production. In contrast, other regions were predominantly shaped by exploitative colonial relations based on the extraction of natural resources, and what is generally called by historians as ‘cycles’, such as the ‘mining cycle’ (i.e. gold) in the South-east, ‘rubber cycle’ in the North region (i.e. Amazon), and ‘sugar cane cycle’ in the North-east region (c/f Groppo 1996). Cardoso (2000) suggests that local needs for expanding economic activities of other regions were only possible due to local supplies from the South (c/f Cardoso 2000: 37). Although economic activities and social relations which emerged in the South region are particular, the local context must still be understood within the broader context of the national economy, as well as colonial relations with Portugal, and interrelations with European markets.

Accordingly, historical and social factors are essential to explain the main reasons for the South of Brazil to have developed relatively more egalitarian society compared with other regions in the country. During the 1880s, unemployed European immigrants settled in the South region of Brazil, and developed productive family farming and agriculture, as an attempt to flee from the negative social effects of processes of industrialisation and modernisation which were predominant in Europe (c/f Groppo 1996). Given that the South region of Brazil is considered to be amongst the most productive regions in the country, with the most egalitarian structures, the re-distribution of land in this region is particularly controversial, and it is clear that social tensions relating to access to land in the South region of Brazil are congruent to vested political and economic interests.

Rural social movements and the struggle over land

Most scholars, who focus on the study of rural social movements, and organisations, view the struggle over land and the problem of ongoing land-related conflict as central issues that affect land reform approaches and strategies. Further, they assume that land-related conflicts in Brazil are primarily a means of pressuring government agencies towards the implementation of land reform programmes (c/f de Janvry and Sadoulet 2002, Petras 2005). In this way, access to land and the redistribution of land are viewed as key factors that underpin rural social movements and their claims for ensuring people's rights.

A predominant assumption amongst development theorists is that social movements accurately reflect the demands of local people. Thus, once the demands of movements have been met, conflict is presumed to be resolved, particularly from the perspective of the government and of the rural social movements. Although many studies have drawn a link between land conflicts and struggles for access to land, rarely is the problem of ongoing conflict after land reform settlements explored. The focus of analysis has typically been on disputes in which land reform activism is central. Those studies which examine sites after land reform has been implemented usually investigate the impacts of land reform programmes (e.g. agricultural productivity, family household incomes, levels of education, and health of the people who live in the settlements), rather than the ongoing conflicts.

Further, a predominant argument sustained by various rural social movements is that land invasions are necessary in the endeavour to redistribute land and thus achieve a more egalitarian agrarian structure. Also, using similar arguments, the national government of Brazil has focused on readdressing the needs of disadvantaged people (i.e. landless peasants) by promoting access to land and incorporating rights-based approaches to land reform programmes. Despite the implementation of various approaches to land reform in Brazil, land conflicts are ongoing at the national level in Brazil, and are usually manifested in the form of land invasions, occupations and protests promoted by rural social movements and organisations.

Given that agricultural production in general is vital for the broader Brazilian society and economy, and that political instability in rural areas, particularly in the South region of Brazil has various negative socio-economic and political effects at the national level, it is critical to seek a better understanding of the reasons for ongoing conflicts in sites in which it is presumed that land reform has addressed the problem of access to land. An exploration of land conflicts has global significance, beyond the Brazilian context. In the global context as well as in the Brazilian context, land reform and land reform activism have not, to date, considered in enough depth the reasons for conflict to be ongoing in supposedly settled sites. Moreover, where the

focus has been on global social movements or grassroots organisations, the link between land reform and social reform has been taken for granted. However, whether access to land realistically addresses problems of social justice needs further consideration. That is, the roots of the problems relating to land conflicts do not appear to be understood in their entirety simply by focusing on access and redistribution of land. This research suggests that an examination of strategies of access to land is not sufficient for understanding factors affecting conflicts, and proposes to find the values and meanings attached to land at the grassroots level affecting conflict.

Rights-based approaches to land reform

Many of the contemporary land reform strategies can be described as rights-based approaches to land reform, which are understood here as those approaches that primarily claim to promote social justice. Various land reform activists and social organisations, both in Brazil and internationally, advocate secure and equitable access to land as an essential component for ensuring human rights, particularly the right to adequate food. To illustrate, the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform promoted by Foodfirst Information and Action Network, and La Via Campesina are informed by the principles highlighted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 25, 1948), as well as the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 11, 1966/1976). Within Brazil, direct action advocated by the Rural Landless Workers Movement (MST) and the Catholic Church's Pastoral Commission (CPT) draws on the argument that the construction of a just society in Brazil can only be achieved through the implementation of land reform, and the dismantlement of what these social movements describe as the dominant, unjust agrarian structure, prevalent in Brazil (c/f Gorgen, 2004).

Communal land settlements (i.e. communal forms of tenure and production) are promoted as 'ideal' rights-based approaches to land reform by the Brazilian Government and the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), and are thought to be more competitive in current agricultural markets. The assumption is even stronger here, that in communal land settlements conflict has been dealt with. Therefore, it is precisely in communal land settlements that conflict and social tensions have been less examined within the development literature.

Dynamic socio-economic and political factors affecting land conflicts

It is clear that there is a geographical division and classification of sites between pre-reform sites and post-reform sites, which limits and is also incompatible with the complex and dynamic socio-economic and political factors affecting the emergence and persistence of conflict. Thus, the kinds of conflicts that emerge in sites which have undergone land reform are not yet clear, and the relationship between distinct land conflicts is obscure. For instance, parties involved in particular land conflicts may well be involved in others. Some peasants who are members of specific rural organisations will continue to participate in other land invasions to help other landless peasants gain access to land, despite already having received their own plot of land through land reform programmes.

In addition to fluidity of engagement by parties in various sites, there is also an enormous amount of fluidity in the understandings and meanings attached to land, as well as in the strategies relating to access to land which are adopted by individuals. The main assumption amongst scholars who focus on social movements is that tenure and access to land are the goal

of conflict, and struggle is thought to be over once land is redistributed to peasants and what they call 'landless peasants'. There is much subjectivity involved in the categorisation of people as 'peasants', 'landless peasants' and 'landowners', which often leads to a complex set of responses by the people themselves. This is further exacerbated by the nomenclature of the various land reform programmes and policies, relating to individual or private, and communal lands. Peasants who were previously frustrated by not having access to land, however, continue to be disappointed even after receiving plots of land, and many peasants direct this frustration at government agencies, which exacerbates social tensions. Despite having received individual land titles through land reform programmes, some peasants continue to protest and to engage with land conflicts and claim communal forms of access to land. It is therefore critical to examine what happens after land re-distribution, to further complement the standard approach of most studies which focus on the pre-settlement context.

Controversies about the nature of conflict and access to land

This paper argues that it is essential to explore the various factors affecting the emergence and existence of different kinds of land conflicts, and the ways in which they are intertwined and interrelated. Barnett (2005) highlights the argument that numerous factors contribute to violence, such as, peoples' vulnerability to risks affecting their livelihoods, and human security, which cannot be examined in isolation from a broader range of social factors, such as the socio-political climate, the extent of poverty, the degree of support (or conversely discrimination) of specific communities, and the access to economic opportunities or decision making processes (2005: 3). Although it is clear that there is no single factor that explains the emergence of violence, generally, land conflicts in Brazil are characterised by contested claims of access to land, as well value and meanings attached to land.

Concurrent conflicts emerge and evolve in various rural settings, including sites which have undergone redistribution through land reform (i.e. land settlements). As yet, there has not been sufficient research on the kinds and intensity of conflicts that emerge in land settlements, and the ways in which the various forms of social tensions and anxieties are dynamic and intertwined. The assumption here is that the emergence and existence of one kind of conflict cannot be fully understood without an in-depth analysis of the other. Further, the context within which land conflicts occur, impact across society, and shape and are shaped by different meanings attached to land: this being the main concern of this research.

Fairhead pursues the argument that "conflicts are less generated by resource poverty and bankruptcy than by resource value and wealth" (2001: 214). Fairhead's argument contests the views that conflicts are generated by scarcity of resources (e.g. land) or poverty, and demonstrates that conflicts may be about "control over valuable resources themselves or over labour, capital, technology, trade routes, market access, and other factors necessary to make them valuable" (2001: 214). Likewise, Neuman argues that while the planning and implementation of development projects, such as village land titling in Tanzania, fails to relieve poverty, it effectively expands and extends state mechanisms of control and surveillance into rural communities and societies, which is not achieved through force and coercion, but primarily through the orderly partitioning of space (i.e. creates a different kind of peasant consciousness based on a schema of generalised surveillance) (2001: 327). This resource wealth approach to conflict is useful for understanding the reasons for land conflicts to be ongoing in Brazil and will enable this research project to identify the value of land in the South region of Brazil, and to explore the relationship between strategies for procuring access to land

(i.e. land reform strategies) and conflict within the broader socio-political and economic context.

The general assumption that motivated this study is that various scholars who focus on the grassroots level argue that land conflicts are ongoing particularly because they perceive rights-based approaches to land reform in the South region of Brazil to have ‘failed’ (c/f Wolford 2004, Martins 2000). These authors argue that the very people who are presumed to be the benefactors of rights-based approaches to land reform (i.e. peasants and landless peasants) have, in fact, been ignored. That is, peasants and landless peasants continue to struggle for their subsistence and to experience conditions of poverty, independent of whether they obtain access to land, migrate or oscillate between rural and urban settings. It seems that, from the perspective of the peasants, rights-based approaches to land reform have typically not fulfilled people’s rights and have not realistically promoted social justice at the grassroots level, whilst reinforcing the interests of specific stakeholders and actors relating to land reform activism.

Various rural social movements and land reform activists in Brazil, as well as at the international level, perceive land reform essentially as a means of achieving justice and ensuring people’s rights. To reiterate, assumptions that access to land is primarily perceived as a basic human rights are frequently voiced even by the major international development agencies such as Food and Agriculture Organisation, and UNDP, supported by International Declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In other words, the meanings attached to land which are advocated by many rural social movements in Brazil, as well as the national government generally take the relationship between access to land and social justice as a given.

Concluding Remarks

This paper argues that an examination of different meanings attached to land, as well as the value of land, are essential for better understanding of the reasons for land conflicts to be ongoing, despite the implementation (albeit partial implementation) of land reform in Brazil. This argument draws on the hypothesis that failure to resolve conflict, from the perspective of the peasants, results from confusion over how the intended beneficiaries of land reform understand what access to land would mean for them (i.e. value and meaning of land are central factors affecting conflict). Therefore, an examination of the differences and the similarities between different meanings attached to land, from the perspective of the key parties involved in land reform activism, will provide insights for better understanding the ways in which the value of land is shaped and re-shaped.

Further, that the value of access to land (i.e. land reform) will not be assessed the same way by all people but will depend on interests, expectations, and the strategies people recognise for achieving goals. This research suggests that land conflicts are ongoing in the South region of Brazil precisely because of the value of land. The expectations that people have at the grassroots level explain the ways in which people view access to land as a means for providing strategies for the bettering of their position. Confusion over various meanings attached to land seem to be at the foci of social anxiety, thus, explaining the ways in which land conflicts are framed by meanings attached to land.

The fact that land conflicts are ongoing even in sites where rights-based approaches to land reform have been implemented suggests that the meanings attached to land by the people at the

grassroots level are not necessarily compatible with the predominant meanings which inform rural social movements seeking land reform, and government agencies that implement rights-based approaches to land reform. If these conflicts are to be resolved, from the perspective of the peasants, it is necessary to understand the expectations and perceptions of the people who are supposedly the beneficiaries of reform.

The examination of the multiple and often ambiguous interpretations of what access to land means, and associated interests in re-distributing access to land is paramount. Given that many studies have examined movement formation and the processes by which various social movements have been transformed into organisations, this research does not focus on the rural social movements seeking land reform, or those primarily concerned with fund-raising for particular projects. Rather, this research is concerned with:

- a) Highlighting the importance of identifying the meanings attached to land expressed at the grassroots level and how these meanings change when rights-based approaches to land reform have occurred; and
- b) Emphasising the need for investigating where these expressed meanings have been harnessed to benefit the leaders of rural social movements, rather than the people they claim to represent.

This research has pragmatic significance. Political instability in the South region of Brazil has negative effects that transcend local interests and impacts on the regional as well as the national economy. By understanding the roots of that conflict in terms of ongoing confusion over what different forms of access to land would mean to those seeking change, the research will provide a basis for designing reforms that resolve, rather than exacerbate conflict, from the perspective of the peasants. Further, by drawing attention to the importance of studying the various meanings attached to land, this research will contribute to broader theorisations of the relationship between land reform and current approaches to development.

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