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Revitalizing the rural world: the beginning of the end of poverty

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A picture is worth more than a thousand words - I thought - as I tried to find the thousand words allotted me to address such complex issues as poverty and rural development.

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If "poverty" could be photographed, it would show a family of landless peasants. Those men and women are the poorest of the world's poor. Coming second to them in this cheerless classification are the people with plots of land that are so small and depleted that they cannot produce enough to feed them. The value of this picture is the clarity of its message: land - or to be more precise, the lack of it - is one of the root causes of world hunger and poverty.

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It is hard to accept that in the 21st century millions of families are still living in poverty due to a lack of access to the most basic production resource: land. The reasons for this injustice have to do with the value which land has had across the ages.

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Land is, always has been and always will be, an essential economic asset in rural societies but its monetary value is not the only, or even the most important, consideration for many millions of people. For indigenous peoples, land is the basis of their identity; it is their home and that of their ancestors, their pharmacy, and their place of work and leisure. In most societies land means power, status, and membership of a social class. For many women, their autonomy depends on it.

About Us

In the final analysis, land means belonging to a place and to a culture. This is why when speaking about landless men and women we are talking about people without a past, without a present and without a future.

RSS

Some of the agrarian reforms implemented in recent years have sought to offer solutions to these problems, with varying degrees of success, but we are still far from having solved the agrarian issue. New worldwide challenges, such as the globalization of trade, the massive rural exodus to the cities, environmental degradation and civil strife (in many instances caused by the lack of access to, and control over, natural resources) demand urgent, global-level responses.

There are barely ten years left to the target date set by the international community in the Millennium Development Goals for halving number of people suffering from hunger in the world. Only a renewed worldwide commitment to the poor rural areas of the world will make it possible to break the vicious circle of poverty and hunger in which more than eight hundred and forty million people in the world are living.

FAO, with the support of the government of Brazil, has decided to assume the leadership of this process and is convening an International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) on 7-10 March at Porto Alegre, Brazil.

The main objectives of the Conference are: knowledge, dialogue and action. Our intention is to share knowledge, experience, success and difficulties regarding the agrarian reforms carried out in different countries in every continent. It is essentially a matter of infusing fresh substance into such "ill-fated" concepts as agrarian reform, and of reflecting together on the future of rural development. Conference will also try to achieve tangible outcomes in the shape of alliances for action.

One of the main lessons learned from the history of agrarian reform throughout the world is that any processes which are not participatory, which fail to listen to all those who have something to say on such a crucial issue as local development, ultimately come to grief. This is why FAO wanted this Conference to be open to participation by everyone. For many months there has been broad consultation within governments and civil society organizations to select the main topics for the Conference agenda.

The list of issues to be addressed is both long and substantial: how to combine social justice with sustainable development, how to legislate for the specific needs of nomadic and sedentary communities, the role of the State and the market in agrarian reform, promote green energy sources such as bioenergy, revitalizing the rural economies, improving the working conditions of temporary farm labour and acknowledging the vital part played by women in agriculture, and conserving natural resources.

At Porto Alegre the debate will hinge around groups of themes, based on case studies and documents. The Conference will issue a Declaration and a Plan of Action. Using a system of indicators and voluntary guidelines, a Panel of International Observers will monitor compliance with this Plan of Action in terms of progress made in national and international legislation.

It is by no means a coincidence that Brazil has been chosen to host this Conference. For it was exactly 60 years ago that the distinguished Brazilian scientist and politician, Josué de Castro, published his extraordinary book, "Geography of Hunger" on the cause of hunger in his country and in the world. His words have been translated into more than 25 languages, and are as topically relevant today as they were then: "Underdevelopment is not the lack of development. It is the result of an ill-guided kind of universal development...Underdevelopment is a product of misuse of natural and human resources...Underdevelopment and hunger can only be eliminated from the face of earth through a global development strategy which will mobilize production means in the interest of the



Dr. Jacques Diouf

Jacques Diouf has been the Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) since 1994.

community." We salute his memory.



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