

The land agenda in Bolivia

This perspective on the land agenda arises from a visit to Bolivia in April 2004 by the Coordinator of the International Land Coalition.

Bolivia is a microcosm of the situation faced, country-after-country, by landless and near-landless people. While the law provides special rights for indigenous peoples and peasants, poor rural households are largely powerless, leaving land largely in the hands of elites.

Today, the 1953 agrarian reforms are sometimes dismissed as a failure. This conclusion is wrong. The reforms overthrew the feudal period and set the stage for agricultural growth, rural transformation and the building of democracy. Before 1953, for instance, newspapers carried advertisements of land being sold with the workers included - workers were essentially treated like slaves. The reforms brought about changes in rural structures that were and are a necessary step for the elimination of rural poverty.

But addressing the land issues of 2004 also requires an understanding of the other side of earlier reforms - what may be called, the "dark-side" of the agrarian reform. Here, we may find the origins of today's struggle for land. The large landowners in the Altiplano, whose lands were redistributed in '53, were often given expansive tracts of land in the Amazonia, the lowlands of the Santa Cruz area and El Chaco. In many instances, this was "ill-gotten" land, where documents attesting to legal title are known to be false. While losing land in the highlands, they gained most of the fertile land in the lowlands.

Today, Bolivia has seven million hectares of usable agriculture land - one million in production by indigenous peoples and peasants and one million by large landowners. The remaining five million hectares are idle but "owned" by large landowners. There is sufficient land to meet the livelihood needs of the rural poor. Much of this land is being held for speculative and often non-productive purposes. For example, in anticipation of rising values, landowners are "buying-up" the corridor for the planned highway to Brazil. In other cases, large tracts of idle land are being used as collateral, not to expand productivity, but to finance non-farm and off-shore investments.

Not only have many in the landowning class gained land "under-the-table" or through legal loopholes, many break the laws outright, particularly with respect to taxation and land valuations. This situation is affirmed by recent intentions of the government to proceed against officials and representatives who have violated norms and regulations. If the state succeeds, it will recover lands that have been obtained through patronage and corruption.

Understandably, the abuse of power has defeated confidence by the poor in the rule of law and the capacity of government to respond to their needs.

The current fractures in Bolivian social and political life should put access to natural resources - land, forests, gas and minerals - at the top of the agenda. At present, these issues may be resolved by enlightened negotiation. If left, the issues are not likely to improve, but the context for negotiation will deteriorate. It will be regrettable if negotiation only comes after paying the economic, political and human costs generated by land conflicts.