

**“In their hands”:  
for the Rural Poor Sustainable Development means Secure Access to Land**

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**Key words:** Sustainable development; Popular Coalition; access to land; security of tenure; land markets; social rights; food security; rural institutions; collaboration.

**ABSTRACT**

The paper looks in practical terms at what sustainable development means for rural communities and at what essential issues have to be addressed to tackle global hunger and poverty. These include access to productive assets, empowerment of the rural poor, ensuring of social rights, and food security. To achieve all of these requires stakeholders and others to work together, to develop viable rural institutions and to look to the future with a new attitude of collaboration. In this context, the paper concludes by identifying the role, functions and activities of the Popular Coalition.

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# **“In their hands”: for the Rural Poor Sustainable Development means Secure Access to Land**

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More than one fifth of the world's population lives in extreme poverty. Some 1.2 billion people live on less than one dollar a day. Seventy-five per cent of the poor, some 900 million people, live in rural areas depending on agriculture and related rural crafts, trade and services for their livelihood. Among the poor, women and women-headed households are the most vulnerable and unfortunately, account for a growing majority of the extreme poor. This 'feminisation of poverty' is deeply worrying for the well-being of future generations.

Historically, rural people have been neglected. Vast numbers are landless or near landless. Their numbers are continuing to rise. They are being joined by groups displaced from more fertile areas as a consequence of land degradation, expropriation, demographic pressures, ethnic conflicts, privatisation of common property land, and the expansion of commercial agriculture. Marginal areas are rapidly becoming ghettos of poverty characterised by reduced soil fertility and the rapid erosion of the natural resource base. More and more farmers and pastoralists are being deprived of land - their main source of production and the basis of their livelihoods. It is ironic that those who are the food producers, largely farm labourers, are among those most vulnerable to food insecurity.

For the rural poor, secure access to land provides the most realistic opportunity to improve their livelihoods and develop assets that can reduce their vulnerabilities. Secure access to land provides the most powerful incentive for the sustainable management of natural resources.

## **1. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MEANS ACCESS TO PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES**

In their quest for food security, the rural poor often have little choice but to use their limited resources extensively. Their negligible natural and capital assets compel them to adopt survival strategies with short-time horizons. They become excluded from productive opportunities by ill-defined or non-existent property rights, limited access to financial services and markets, inadequate security against natural disasters, lack of education and training, and very little power in decision-making. Understandably, when property rights are lacking or insecure, farmers cannot be sure they will receive the benefits, and therefore, lack the incentives to make investments for the longer term. Instead, they mine the soil and then move deeper into the forest.

In rural areas of most developing countries, land is not only the primary means for generating a livelihood, but also the vehicle to accumulate capital and transfer it between generations. All too often, prevailing land-use systems, such as tenancy conditions, limit the ability of the poor to use land to accumulate capital assets. Whereas, under a secured tenurial system, land can be used to accumulate capital on the basis of which households gain livelihood options.

The collateral or sale value, provides the incentive to invest in productivity improvements while also offering the option to convert their assets, in whole or in part, into other income earning opportunities.

The systemic policy and regulatory frameworks that prevent the poor from building assets, both physical and human, has a critical bearing on the social fabric of societies and on overall economic development. For vast numbers of the rural poor, empowerment means securing resource rights and fostering direct participation in the integrated planning and management of land, water and common property. Pro-poor policies can not only improve rural livelihoods systems, but can also increase aggregate food supplies, raise rural employment and foster the uptake of more sustainable agricultural practices.

Today, rural decision-makers are beginning to understand the interactions between poverty, land rights, conflicts and the sustainable use of natural resources. Asset ownership by the poor is increasingly recognised as being essential to sustained and broad based economic growth. The expansion of this understanding has, in recent years, resulted in the gradual re-focusing of national and international agendas on the revival of land tenure as well as on the resource rights of fisher folk and coastal communities, forest dwellers, pastoralists and other traditional resource users.

There are many interconnected features framing resource rights. Among these, the manner by which land is regulated, rights are assigned and conflicts are resolved pre-determines the opportunities for the rural poor to:

- ensure their household food security;
- invest in the long term productivity of the resource;
- access financial services;
- earn income by marketing surpluses;
- accumulate capital and assets;
- preserve their assets during periods of agricultural stress;
- invest in alternate livelihood options; and,
- transfer assets to overcome inter-generational poverty.

The economic, social and environmental functions of land provides a platform for a more holistic approach to empowering the rural poor to become agents of their own well-being.

## **2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MEANS EMPOWERING THE RURAL POOR**

Despite these convincing reasons, few countries have undertaken major agrarian reform measures. In many countries, the political and economic difficulties have been formidable. As difficult as it may be, the challenge to implement agrarian reform is rooted in the political courage to take pro-poor decisions.

Understanding the strategic requirements for agrarian reform is not new. Even in countries committed to improving access to land and the security of tenure, implementation is often

slow, delayed or manipulated by powerful interests and the landed class. In other cases, the lack of beneficiary participation has limited the impact and sustainability of reform efforts.

Fortunately, the increasing efforts of civil society, the rise of democratic institutions and increased awareness of the political consequences of neglecting poverty are factors producing more favourable enabling conditions. There are also indications that economic liberalisation and institutional reforms may reduce or eliminate distortions that have historically favoured the powerful. For the rural poor this may mean greater access to land, assuming that government policies and market conditions will eliminate domestic subsidies that have favoured large-scale farmers. Furthermore, international trade practices must re-dress subsidy and support mechanisms that distort prices paid for locally produced food. Land taxes can be a further incentive by making the practice of holding land for speculative purposes more costly.

Lessons from the past emphasise the need to move from a system in which the poor participate in officially led development toward one in which governments and external donors support people-initiated development.

International institutions with a mandate to foster development often lack the necessary community involvement. At the same time, citizen organisations often lack access to decision-making and policy setting that directly affects their livelihood systems. The dramatic rise in the number and nature of civil-society organisations reflects the growing call by the public to participate in setting policies and designing the programmes and services of governments. This is driven by rising public concern for social justice, equity and the livelihood opportunities for the poor and marginalized. And, it is occurring in a context where governments are struggling to serve their citizens in a global market place that is often beyond their legislative and regulatory control.

In summary, the history of sustainable development strategies has shown that government-led development without the active support of civil-society, and civil-society movements without the institutional and enabling support of government have both failed. The record of official development assistance confirms that the active participation by communities in the planning and implementation of development policies and programmes is an essential prerequisite to sustainable human development. These lessons point to the need for more effective alliances linking governments to their civil-society organisations, coupled with the moral and financial persuasion of the international community.

### **3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MEANS ENSURING SOCIAL RIGHTS**

Over the past 25 years, international leaders and Heads of State have searched for a common global agenda through the well-known series of Summits. Each Summit examined a pending crisis - the environment, development, energy, and food. Of the many conclusions, the one of most significance is that there are no separate crises. They are all one and the same. An analysis of the Summit declarations finds that the single most important and common cause and effect is poverty resulting from the unequal access and use of natural resources. If the protocols were blended into one international plan, the call would be to:

- address the consequences of the widening gap in the distribution of wealth;
- provide access by the poor to productive resources;
- involve the poor in policy and programme decisions affecting their livelihoods;
- reform macro-economic policies that adversely affect the poor; and,
- ensure the sustainable use of natural resources.

A review of these protocols highlights the re-occurring description of the poor as lacking assets, being vulnerable to agriculture and economic shocks, lacking the capacity (training and knowledge) to participate in decision-making affecting their livelihoods, and suffering from an inter-generational sense of being powerless to change their condition.

This continuing situation casts grave doubts on the political commitments behind the summit outcomes of the 1990s. The Millennium Development Goals offer new opportunities based on commitments from the highest levels. Of the many opportunities to build partnerships for action, the outcomes of three international events of 2002 will contain the tell-tale signs of the potential for progress. These include the United Nations Financing for Development Conference, the follow-up to the 1996 World Food Summit and the World Summit on Sustainable Development coming 10 years after the Earth Summit in Rio. These conferences are being prepared with the goal of creating practical programme partnerships that respond to the needs of the rural poor? Putting these global agreements into action is a need of the highest order since the policy and regulatory frameworks governing land and tenure have a critical bearing on the social fabric of societies and on overall economic development.

Resource management strategies in the past tended to neglect social, economic and institutional factors and concentrated almost exclusively on the technical aspects of production. Accordingly, agrarian reform is most often considered to define property relationships since it involves a wide range of essentially technical elements. However, first and foremost, agrarian reform is about sustainable development. Sustainable development is essentially about people and the way they organise their social, economic and political systems to make the critical decisions on who has the right to use which resources, in which ways, for how long and for which purposes.

Essentially, agrarian reform is about changing inequitable relationships. It aims to change land tenure relationships. It aims to change the current culture of exclusion so that the poor gain access to credit, technology, markets and other productive services. And, it aims for the poor to be active participants in the development of government policies and programmes affecting their communities and livelihoods.

#### **4. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MEANS FOOD SECURITY**

The debate on sustainable development and food security has often been framed as two competing forces - access by the landless or small holders and the land needed to feed a growing population. This is a false paradigm. Providing access to the rural poor, feeding future populations and sustainable resource use are not conflicting calls on land use.

As financially profitable as commercial farming may be, studies examining food security consistently reveal that there is an inverse relationship between farm size and productivity. In many contexts, large farms produce lower outputs of food per unit of land than do family operated farms. Instead of intensifying production to meet the needs of growing populations, large farms tend to increase the pressure on fragile lands by displacing labour.

Smallholder farms use family labour. Large farmers, finding labour to be their highest costs, revert to mechanisation and higher levels of chemical inputs. Family farming uses a higher level of labour per unit of land. This approach allows for a more ecological approach to agriculture while also supporting greater intensification because each unit of land can be managed with more direct attention.

This requires a tenurial security approach to development. It is build on the incentives that tenure provides to use land in a sustainable manner. Furthermore, property rights provide the collateral needed by the poor to access credit for capital and agro-inputs, and to invest in the quality of the land over the longer term.

In addition, secure property rights are crucial for land markets. Poorly functioning land markets tend to lower land values because effective demand is limited. Lower land values reduce the incentives to invest in conservation because farmers cannot realise the benefits of investments if they sell the land. Low land values also reduce the value of the land as collateral since the lender cannot easily sell the land to recover lost credit. Credit therefore, tends to be more expensive when land markets function poorly.

In the absence of land rights it is exceedingly difficult to establish sustainable land management practices. On the contrary, human induced desertification results from the expansion of rainfed cultivation onto unsuitable lands, continuous cultivation that depletes nutrients, excessive use of ground water, overgrazing, deforestation linked to fuelwood needs and expansion of the agricultural frontier.

## **5. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MEANS WORKING TOGETHER**

Sustainable development is a process of ongoing negotiation. It means creating the ways and means for dialogue and negotiating enforceable agreements between all parties that rely upon or benefit from the land in question. It requires legislative, regulatory and judicial systems for the transfer and protection of the land rights of the poor and systems for the resolution of the conflicts that inevitably arise.

To be effective, it will be essential to:

- strengthen the capacity of community organisations and their collective action with like-minded communities;
- foster their access to financial services, technology and markets; and,
- support the processes whereby they gain power in local and national governance.

Otherwise, the lessons from the past indicate that elites, outside traders, moneylenders and other officials will expropriate the benefits over relatively short periods of time.

The collaborative actions of governments, civil-society and intergovernmental organisations can:

### **5.1 Facilitate Alliances between Sectors**

- building broad-based political and economic support for land tenure reform, access to factor inputs and protecting the natural resources base;
- educating the public, especially in the North, to the fact that smallholder farms are potentially more productive and environmentally sustainable than large-scale commercial agriculture;
- uniting urban and rural peoples into action to counter the effects of out-migration on rural economies and its aggravating effects on urban poverty; and,
- collecting and sharing lessons between communities that demonstrate practical ways to overcome the problems of earlier agriculture sector reforms.

### **5.2 Establish Transparent Public Policies and Services**

- strengthening land registries, cadastre systems and land survey methods;
- establishing appropriate legal, regulatory and judicial frameworks for the registration and protection of people's resource rights;
- establishing independent and accountable land commissions with effective participation by potential beneficiaries;
- ensuring women's rights through land records, communal property systems, inheritance rights of widows and daughters and representation in local decision-making bodies and land commissions;
- halting the expansion of the agricultural frontier onto fragile lands;
- removing subsidies and tax provisions that provide distorting privileges to large-scale farmers;
- reforming practices that subsidise internationally traded agricultural products and thereby distort prices paid for locally produced foods;
- establishing land tax systems, especially for under-utilised land and land held for speculative purposes; and,
- developing methods to increase financing for land reform and post-land acquisition services including land banks, land for debt schemes and land for taxes.

### **5.3 Strengthen Rural People's Organisations**

- involving local communities in demarcating new lands;
- protecting traditional forms of land tenure; inter alia, common property and pastoralist areas;
- ensuring direct roles for beneficiaries in land valuation processes and in determining repayment terms;

- supporting education, organisation and capacity building of landless and near-landless people on their rights and the ways to achieve related legal provisions;
- strengthening rural, agriculture and peasant organisations, ensuring they are inclusive of women-headed households, widows, indigenous people, lower castes and other marginalised population groups;
- organising communities into units of sufficient scale to access credit, technology and marketing services; and,
- protecting the knowledge systems of indigenous and nomadic people while strengthening their access to complementary resources management technologies.

#### **5.4 Work in Partnership with International Organisations**

- leveraging the moral persuasion and financial conditionality of international organisations in order to place land and resource rights on national agendas;
- assisting governments and civil-society to monitor progress toward secure access to land and other productive assets in the context of the Millennium Development Goals as well as the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the follow up to the 1996 World Food Summit; and,
- developing ways and means to strengthen government systems to enable their compliance with international agreements.

### **6. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES RURAL INSTITUTIONS**

Secure land and resource rights can be provided by both informal and formal institutions. Both systems must provide information on who owns the land, who has a secure interest in the land, how land is transacted, and how conflicts are to be resolved.

Community-defined ownership or user rights may perform these functions, whereas in other cases, formal property systems may be needed. Formal systems may be necessary to reduce land disputes where population growth or demand for agricultural products leads to competitive pressures for the land, or where transactions with those outside the community are common. However, large-scale titling programmes should only be considered where competitive pressures, disputes and conflicts mean that community land tenure arrangements are ineffective

In many cases, titles have formalised undocumented tenancy rights, including long-established community-based systems. Community-based approaches offer a cheaper and effective alternative to formal institutions. They are effective because buyers and sellers know each other at the local level, meaning that there is strong peer pressure to avoid socially disruptive property disputes. In these cases, the main source of demand for land is often from within the community; the community is close-knit; there is continuity of community leadership; and certificates of ownership, issued by the community are accepted by those in the same community.

More formal land market institutions include land registries, titling services, and land mapping. In building these institutions, three characteristics should be kept in mind:



- clear definition and sound administration of property rights;
- simple mechanisms for identifying and transferring property rights; and,
- thorough compilation of land titles and free access to this information.

Clearly defined land parcels need to be based on credible land surveys, where credibility is most assured if community representatives are directly involved in surveying, community mapping and boundary demarcation. Otherwise, the long and difficult process of resolving land disputes can undermine the fundamental aim of land registries.

In practice, any system for establishing land rights needs to be based on a simple method of identification and transfer. One way to do this is to convert occupancy rights into full titles to cultivators based on actual occupation, which in Mozambique was the last 10 years. In this example, oral testimony was sufficient to support land ownership claims, and communities may request formal titles at any point. Mapping and documentation of land rights is carried out by a professional team, accompanied by the land user or owner, neighbours, and village chiefs, moving from field to field within a village area. Disputes are settled on the spot. When mapping and documentation of ownership and user rights are completed, the information is made publicly available so that claimants can openly register disagreements. If no conflicting claims have been made within three months, the tenure status is considered satisfied.

## **7. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES NEW COLLABORATION**

The complexities of sustainable development requires robust partnerships of citizen, governmental and international organisations that can share and replicate successful sustainable development experiences and build common platforms for action among affected groups. Actions such as joint pilot projects can build practical ways of working together and result in better targeting of available resources to the poor.

At the 1995 Conference on Hunger and Poverty, sponsored by the International Fund for Agriculture Development, a diverse group of stakeholders, including inter-governmental organisations, citizen organisations, NGOs, government officials, bilateral agencies and international financial institutions produced a consolidated analysis on the constraints to sustainable human development. They called for urgent action to revive agrarian reform on national and international agendas. They committed themselves to form a coalition of equals that would unite their common concerns into one agenda to empower the rural poor through improved access to productive assets. The Popular Coalition involves a multitude of civil society, intergovernmental and governmental organisations. It is governed by seven regional citizen / NGO networks and five intergovernmental organisations; namely, the International Fund for Agricultural Development which serves as the international focal point, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme, the World Bank, the European Commission.

Its aim is to build strategic and innovative alliances between diverse development organisations giving particular emphasis to the role of civil society in gaining access to land and water and by increasing their direct participation in decision-making from the local to the international level.

The Popular Coalition's programme of action is informed by three key lessons from the past:

- the need for a broad based and comprehensive approach to agrarian reform involving consensus building and policy dialogue;
- the political sensitivities involved in agrarian reform will require that the viability of the proposed approaches have been well demonstrated before policy makers will consider adopting reform on a large scale; and,
- the need to strengthen the capacity of community organisations so that they can become effective interlocutors with their government for policy development and programme delivery.

Toward this goal the Popular Coalition has formed the Agrarian Reform Network (ARnet), a knowledge network currently active in 25 countries, to exchange the lessons learnt from the practical work of community-based organisations. Through ARnet international, regional, national and grassroots organisations are gaining from each other's knowledge and collaborating to promote the successful practices, policies and innovative institutional arrangements linking civil society and government.

The Popular Coalition has also established a Community Empowerment Facility to:

- strengthen the negotiating ability of the poor to achieve secure access to land including common property, water and associated support services;
- facilitate community participation in policy dialogue and local governance;
- build on traditional organisations and practices;
- strengthen rural people's organisations in solidarity with others;
- support changes required in agrarian institutions;
- facilitate conflict resolution processes;
- replicate and scale up agrarian reform models; and,
- disseminate best practices and lessons learned.

In reflection of the need for wider dialogue between actors, the Popular Coalition has joined forces with others to popularise agrarian reform and raise its importance on national and international agendas. In preparing for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, a collaborative effort is in motion to establish a Common Platform on Access to Land. It is envisioned that this platform will achieve a high level of stakeholder and political commitment at the Summit in Johannesburg in August 2002. This initiative aims to build national level partnerships that can have a meaningful effect on country-level policies and resource flows in the year thereafter.

The Popular Coalition believes that the right to land and water is basic to durable solutions to poverty and the sustainable use of natural resources. The Popular Coalition is a new way of working for many of its partner institutions. The emphasis is on strengthening its partners to enhance their agrarian reform policies and programmes and to target the use of their resources in a more coherent framework based on the lessons of the past. There is no need for a new institution. The need is to work together to use resources synergistically and collectively

influence the ways and means for the rural poor to become the agents of their own development.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Bruce Moore is the Coordinator of the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty.