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# Land Reform and Rural Conflict

If Latin American governments want to use land reform as a tool to blunt rural conflict and insurgencies, what should they do? According to Michael Albertus, they must first ensure that the reforms are large enough to dampen rural grievances. They then must prop up the changes with 'agricultural inputs, infrastructure and credits'.

By Michael Albertus for ISN

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Land is fertile ground for contentious politics. Recent decades have seen high rates of stubbornly persistent civil conflicts and rebellions, often with roots in rural areas. Countries such as Colombia, Nepal, and the Philippines continue to struggle with insurgencies fueled by conflict over land. Meanwhile, Brazil, Burma, South Africa, Venezuela, and a host of other developing states are trying to keep a lid on widespread and destabilizing land squatting.

Given the importance of the rural sector in modernizing and underdeveloped states where rebellions tend to occur, land reform has long been cited as a potential remedy for rural unrest. Although the heyday of land reform was the Cold War era – with reforms in places such as Chile, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, and even by the US in Vietnam – its history can be traced back far before that period. And despite not entirely ending with the Cold War (Zimbabwe is a case in point), land reform is today returning in force to the agendas of national governments, organizations such as the World Bank, and a host of NGOs.

There are good reasons for this. Half of the world's population remains rural. While urbanization continues apace, rural populations continue to grow in many countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa. The result is that land pressure continues to rise in these countries, and the situation is made worse by the fact that poverty is disproportionately concentrated in rural areas. This explains why rural instability remains so potent and widespread across the world – as demonstrated by events such as the protests last year by tens of thousands of Colombian farmers, who took to the streets and blockaded food supplies to demand more support for small-scale agriculture in the form of subsidies and rural infrastructure.

Though land reform policy is unlikely to be structured as it was during the Cold War, its rising importance, particularly in the developing world, prompts us to consider its efficacy and the lessons that can be learned about the role of land reform in undercutting rural conflict.

## **The role of land reform in stemming insurgency**

Land reform can help to draw the fuel out of insurgencies by reducing rural grievances. In rural

settings, land productivity and ownership are key determinants of poverty. Rural poverty and landlessness can contribute to rural grievances and support for anti-system insurgent groups. Landless or land-poor individuals face lower opportunity costs for joining armed groups, are more susceptible to selective benefits that may be provided by insurgent groups, and have higher expected gains from revolution. All of these factors can induce civilians to support or join insurgent groups based in the countryside. By contrast, receiving land via land reform can increase well-being through the ability to produce, market, and consume goods, obtain credit to make investments, and protect against economic shocks.

Land reform can also undercut peasant grievances over landholding inequality and, consequently, rebel support – by giving the aggrieved a vested interest, as property owners, in maintaining the new status quo. Converting the landless or those with precarious tenure into smallholders can reduce disparities between these beneficiaries and existing landholders, increasing their upward mobility and engendering economic competition among smallholders that undermines their potential for collective action.

### **When land reform succeeds and fails**

Colombia illustrates these dynamics well. Its most serious and sustained effort at land reform began in 1961 under the Social Agrarian Reform Act following more than a decade of brutal civil war in which 200,000 people died. In the mid-1960s, Colombian leaders faced the threat of insurgency with the formation of peasant “independent republics” and new Communist guerrilla groups such as the FARC and ELN. Over the next forty years, land reform was vigorously and continuously implemented in a limited number of poor frontier regions far from the reach of the state and where the likelihood of civil conflict was high. The concentration of reforms in these areas tended to reduce the intensity of future guerrilla activity.

Yet Colombia also illustrates that land reform efforts can backfire. Apart from the limited areas of intense reform, the vast majority of land reform was implemented piecemeal and incompletely, blocked in most regions by politically powerful large landholders. [Research](#) I have conducted demonstrates that low-intensity and geographically dispersed land reform created spillover effects that spurred low levels of insurgent activity which were not severe enough to threaten elite interests. In most areas, therefore, greater levels of land reform were linked to increased guerrilla activity. The government’s lack of credibility on land reform and the difficulties experienced in its implementation have hampered progress on President Santos’ landmark Victims Law. These challenges have also undercut support for ongoing peace negotiations with the FARC among peasant groups that were initially given little voice in the land reform component of the deal.

The perverse effects of watered-down or incomplete land reform in Colombia have been replicated in many other countries. The Peruvian military regime’s [massive land reform](#) program in the 1970s, for instance, ultimately contributed to the rise of Shining Path. Subsequent guerrilla activity was concentrated in regions like Ayacucho and Apurímac where reforms were less comprehensive, and in poorer, indigenous peasant communities that were left out of reforms altogether. In contrast to the substantial number of peasants who joined or supported Shining Path from marginalized communities that were neglected by land reform, very few joined from the ranks of the coastal cooperatives – which were major beneficiaries of land reform. Peasants from more organized communities such as the *rondas* in Cajamarca also tended to resist rather than join Shining Path.

Brazil’s ongoing [large-scale land reform](#) program also exemplifies this dynamic. Despite granting 70 million hectares of land to nearly one million families over the last twenty years, there have been thousands of land invasions carried out by several million individuals. This is because Brazil responds to land invasions and rural land pressure with expropriation and redistribution rather than leading the

process by targeting unproductive land and through programs such as building a land bank for qualified petitioners. While this legal framework protects large landowners from broad, state-initiated land redistribution, it nonetheless creates incentives for rural conflict and land threats in the form of land invasions. Land reforms therefore yield substantial spillover effects whereby successful land reforms in one region often result in further land invasions in neighboring areas. This has led to the formation of armed militias funded by landowners and the assassination of peasant organizers.

These examples demonstrate that land reform must be sufficiently large-scale in order to be effective at addressing rural grievances. This is particularly true of reforms that are designed to stamp out isolated problems rather than directly confront the lack of rural access to land through top-down reform.

Furthermore, without sufficient support in the form of agricultural inputs, rural infrastructure, and credits, land reforms targeted at counterinsurgency will likely be incomplete and lead to renewed conflict. El Salvador and Guatemala are instructive examples. Market-based land reforms were a cornerstone of negotiations terminating civil wars in these countries and have successfully brought land to the tiller while staving off a return to full-scale conflict. Nevertheless, the lack of complementary measures, alongside weak enforcement mechanisms, has fuelled violence associated with gangs and organized crime outfits, effectively transforming the problem rather than eliminating it.

Neglected peripheries, vague property rights, and frontier regions populated with subsistence farmers continue to characterize many developing and conflict-ridden countries. Though land reform is rightly being resurrected as a tool to deal with the problems arising in these areas, practitioners would be advised to think carefully about the scope and design of reform so as not to throw more fuel on the fire.

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