Beyond Land Reforms: Strengthening Links with Food Sovereignty and Land Rights Activists

By:

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The ANRC's volume on 'Rethinking Land Reforms in Africa: new ideas, opportunities and challenges' delivers what it promises: a diverse and stimulating compilation of perspectives over the relationship between land and the socio-economic conditions of people in Sub Saharan Africa. Its main merits are the reclamation of the political nature of land, the combination of academic and non-academic contributors who break with the monotone and hyper-specialized vocabulary that tend to monopolize conversations around land reforms, and the variety of topics and perspectives (including in disagreement).

The role of the modern state in reproducing colonial dynamics (Wiley), the obsession with formalization (Stein), the limits of titling as a silver bullet (Berry), the role of mapping and experts in defining land and the communities

rather than simply describing them (Bassett), and the need to look at land rights in the broader picture of an interconnected economy that operates at different levels (Cotula) are just four of the several interventions that challenge the dominant narrative of international organizations and financial institutions and that will hopefully trigger significant reconsiderations of the current modus operandi. All seasoned with some comparative considerations (Taiwan, Brazil, Philippines, etc) and the strength of bottom-up empirical research.

However, it would be too easy to fill this short piece with statements on the qualities of the volume. Therefore, I decided to follow the pathway traced by Cosmas in the introductory chapter and point at three aspects that do not find sufficient space in the book and that would reinforce both the notion that 'land reform is inherently political' and the need to consider, dialogue with and (often) challenge the multiple analytical frameworks that compete in the background of the understanding of land and the influence the substance and processes underpinning land reforms.

Firstly, I will offer some considerations on the importance to link the topic of land reforms in Africa with the ongoing struggles for food sovereignty and agroecology as brought forward by the members of the Nyeleni Coalition and recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. Secondly, I will highlight the physical and cultural violence that is often exercised to oppose the movements fighting for land and food justice and will suggest that an understanding of land reforms as political moment cannot overlook the fact that politics is often played in very nasty ways.

Land Reform as an Essential Step Towards Food Sovereignty and Agroecology

Several contributions suggest that we cannot disentangle land from the broader socio-economic network of actors (humans, animals and institutional) that lives in the land, farms it, benefits from it and extracts value from it. Land as a combination of soil and multiple natural elements is much more than an object: is a space that is historically, culturally, socially, and materially defined by society and that defines the way in which society can organize, thrive or extinguish. In this symbiosis between nature and society, what authors like

Fritjof Capra and Jason Moore call the 'Web of life', food plays an essential role. With very limited exceptions (e.g. hydroponic), lands and soil are essential to food production and, therefore, to the survival of our species.

If food is essential to human life on earth, it should come as no surprise that food is as political as land and that there is no one system of food production, distribution, consumption and management of food waste. Food and land are political, so much that critical food scholars use the term 'food regime' rather than food system in order to underline its political and contentious nature, The choice of one food regime rather than another depends, as for land reforms, by the analytical framework and the political power of certain visions.

When we talk about land reforms and the link that different land arrangements have with food production (as is the case in Alden WIly, Chitonge, Cotula, Stein and Peter's contributions to the book, among others), we shall always ask ourselves what food regime are we promoting, who benefits from it, what is its environmental impact and what other political interventions are needed - along with land reforms/redistribution - to foster. It is not the same to claim that land reform shall increase productivity to export, that it shall give an opportunity to borrow money to modernize or that it shall be put at the center of the broader struggle for food sovereignty as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural system.

From the point of view of food sovereignty advocates, land reform- in the sense of both recognition of customary rights and the redistribution of concentrated land in favour of small-scale farmers - is crucial. This is also recognized by the UN Declaration of the Rights of Peasants, whose article 17 is dedicated to the right to land and recognizes that the right to have access to, sustainable use and manage land and the water bodies, coastal seas, fisheries, pastures and forests, for peasants are essential to achieve an adequate standard of living, to have a place to live in security, peace and dignity and to develop their cultures.

However, food sovereignty requires more than the guarantee of the access to land, the right to return to the land of which they were arbitrarily or unlawfully deprived, or the protection from unlawful dispossessions and evictions. It

requires a holistic understanding of food production as dependent on much more than owning, accessing and governing land: it requires agrarian reforms that support the livelihood of peasants and workers by freeing them from the yoke of private debt, supporting diversification of crops rather than monoculture providing them with access to local markets - including by means of public procurement. In addition, linking land and food sovereignty also requires regulatory interventions that challenge the concentration of power in the food chain by breaking up monopolies and oligopolies, the inequality of market dynamics and unfair trading practices, and the use of toxic pesticides and fertilizers.

Moreover, if land reforms in Africa were to embrace food sovereignty, it would require a holistic approach to land, food and the peasants that protect biodiversity and traditional practices. It would also promote agroecology as an environmentally and socially just form of farming and interacting with nature, rejects intellectual property regimes that push for the privatization of seeds and plant varieties, spare farmers from the volatility of prices that is caused by the financialization of the food chain and intervene by banning agricultural practices that are unhealthy for people and unhealthy for the planet .

More importantly, food sovereignty is based on the recognition of power imbalances within the food chain and at the level of political representation of the countryside vis-a-vis the cities, but also of smaller economies vis-a-vis larger economic players, Therefore, food sovereignty is based on the need to guarantee the autonomous decision of peasants, establish democratic decision-making processes and transfer resources from public authorities and corporations to the people who produce - all over the world- more than 70% of the food. Thus, the achievement of food sovereignty is entrenched in the promotion of holistic land and agricultural reforms but also premised on the reconfiguration of the role that land, agriculture and peasants play in the context of the global economy and the emancipation of African states from international debt, investment regime and trade dependence.

As Borras, Franco and Monsalve Suarez already wrote in 2015: 'Land and food politics are intertwined. Efforts to construct food sovereignty often involve struggles to (re)constitute democratic systems of land access and control". The

hope is that the different contributions to the ANRC's volume, non of which directly mentions food sovereignty but some of which indirectly dialogue with its principle and political horizon, could be enriched with the demands and struggles of millions of peasants - in Africa and all over the world - who are seeing land reforms and redistribution as an essential but insufficient steps towards a food regime that is based on rights, democracy, ecology and justice. At the same time, more efforts like the ANRC's book are needed to pierce the walls between land and food studies and to create bridges and solidarity across struggles that are inevitably interdependent.

Let's Hear the Voices of the Land Struggle

My second consideration stems from the last point: if land distribution is political, any edited volume, article, contribution and account on land reforms and land distributions is inevitably political. As such, it must be aware of the political context in which it will be operating and conscious of the impact that it will have in terms of reproduction or disruption of the status quo,. Although it may have not been the purpose of the edited volume, the lack of voices from the struggle and the lack of accounts of the violence experienced in the ground by human rights activists, land activists and environmental protectors is noteworthy. If one of the aspirations of the book is to challenge mainstream and hyper technical visions of land reforms (that de-politicize the matter and label it as a 'question for experts), the reader is not confronted with the crude reality of the people, movements and organizations who risk their lives in order to obtain a just and ecological transformation of the tenure system.

In the context of the People's Sovereignty Network and a special issue of Globalizations, I recently had the privilege to interview and dialogue with four land activists from Kenya, Guatemala, the Basque Country and the Six Nations territories in Canada. Similarly, through the Global Legal Action Network, I provide legal support to local non-governmental organizations fighting for the redistribution of 110,000 hectares of land stolen by Leopard II in the Democratic Republic of Congo and to maintain the communal land tenure system in the island of Barbuda. In the context of the Food, Land and Climate Justice Network, I am also dialoguing with land and food activists in Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Colombia and Belize.

In all our conversations, several points tend to emerge that resonate with the content of the ANRC's volume: the legacy of colonialism, the role of the modern state, the double-edge sword of law, the role that land plays in the process of personal and collective emancipation, and the conflict between analytical frameworks and philosophies between people, experts, corporations and public authorities. However, there is an aspect that is at the same time visible and invincible, that is the continuous fear that activists experience, the physical and moral violence that they suffer, the militarization, the fatigue, and the fact that the fight for land and territory is often the fight for survival.

The ANRC's edited volume is missing these voices and is missing this piece of the picture . The contentious and political nature of land reforms is mentioned but the space of struggle is that of regulation, institutions and effectiveness of the ideas (e.g. individual titling versus collective titling versus recognition of customary rights or implementation of free prior and informed consent.) However, the tens of activists that are killed every year, the threats, the forceful evictions, and the impunity of private security guards tell a different story. These lives and their stories cannot be kept invincible or silenced. If land reforms are political, and if land reforms shall aim at building a socially environmentally just society, the denunciation of and engagement with the injustice and violence that uphold the vision of land as a factor of capitalist production are an inevitable step in the transformative process that we all hope for.

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