

Book Review

M. Lipton, 2009. *Land reform in Developing Countries: Property Rights and Property Wrongs*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 384 pp., £26.00 ISBN: 978-0-415-61556-3 (paperback) and £100.00 ISBN: 978-0-415-09667-6 (hardback)

The study of land reform has been an enduring theme in Michael Lipton's long and distinguished career. *Land Reform in Developing Countries: Property Rights and Property Wrongs* is a comprehensive, scholarly and passionate collation of his years of research and policy analysis on this issue. A packed, tightly argued and a very comprehensive review of empirical literature in a wide and heavily researched field, it is an essential read for anyone concerned with the history and implementation of land reform – a topic of continuing importance and interest.

The book's starting point is a normative definition of land reform as 'laws with the main aim of reducing poverty by substantially increasing the proportion of farmland controlled by the poor, and thereby their income, power or status'. Its main argument is that access to rights over productive land is critical for poor people: where they have such access it can provide them with important livelihood opportunities, but where tenure constraints limit their access to it or their ability to use land productively then they lose, and as a result of the inverse relationship (IR, see below) the wider economy loses too. Land reform, if done well (or even partly well) then has much to offer in terms of poverty reduction and increased equity and economic growth. The book examines these issues in detail, and then seeks to identify how land reform can be done well, in different contexts, how different forms of land reform are likely to perform and can best be implemented, and what types of land reform to avoid. It calls on extensive research findings on 20th and 21st century land reform programmes of different types around the world, with 36 pages of references and 57 pages of end notes.

Land reform is a complex, contentious topic, a word that means different things to different people. Central to Lipton's definition of land reform (very briefly introduced in the book's opening paragraph but discussed and developed in detail in an appendix) is its *intention* to benefit the poor by increasing their control of land. The first chapter of the book therefore considers how these intentions may play out, but takes this further to make the point that land reform's progress depends on the way that it is also seen to advance, or at least not threaten, the goals of others: the articulation of benefits to other stakeholders is critical for the development of alliances that can overcome inevitable opposition from land reform's potential losers and/or convince them that land reform is an acceptable and necessary option. Political economy is therefore a critical part to understanding support for and implementation of land reform. Successful (or partially successful) land reform also changes the political economy in which the poor operate, and can therefore catalyse other local and wider change.

The book's second chapter deals with another 'foundational' topic in land reform – one on which Lipton has written extensively in the past – the inverse relationship or IR, the debated observation that small farms achieve higher land productivity than large farms in poor, labour abundant poor economies. Lipton handles well the exten-

sive and sometimes conflicting evidence on this, emphasising the importance of transaction costs, the differences between social and private efficiency, and situations where the IR does and does not hold. The result is a nuanced understanding of the IR, and hence of diverse and changing situations in which it is relevant to land reform debates.

Chapters 3–6 then give detailed reviews of experience with different types of policies variously labelled as land reform, starting from ‘classic’ redistributive land reforms (which most closely conform to Lipton’s land reform definition), moving through tenancy reforms, collectivisation and decollectivisation (labelled ‘the terrible detour’ as they fail to satisfy Lipton’s intentional criterion for land reform) to ‘alternatives, complements and new wave land reform’ – ‘attempts to achieve the goals of land reform without direct transfer of land rights’. Running through these chapters is a common theme – a review of experience to identify the elements of different land reform approaches that will deliver the goal of poverty reduction by increasing control of farmland by the poor. ‘Classic land reform’, Lipton argues, has consistently (but not universally) offered most to the poor, even after evasion and resistance. Consistent with the political coverage in chapter 1, the credible threat of classic land reform can also deliver important benefits for the poor in their access to land and to services that increase its productivity.

The final chapter of the book discusses claims about the ‘death of land reform’ – that land reform has never really achieved much, is not politically important, and is no longer helpful or needed – since the inverse relationship has weakened, land holdings are not so unequal, markets are more efficient at redistributing resources and anyway own account farming is no longer as important for the poor as it was. The first argument is effectively addressed in the previous chapters, and this chapter therefore shows that land inequality continues in some countries and that land reform has continued to be important politically and in government policies across Latin America, Asia and Africa. It then argues for the continuing importance of own account farming for the poor and of land reform as a potential contributor to raising poor people’s incomes and increasing their farm and non-farm livelihood choices. Land reform is not, however, a universal panacea or the only game in town. Improved science and its application (another long standing theme in Lipton’s work), infrastructure, and market access, for example, also have important contributions to make to agricultural development – but development in these fields and poor people’s access to and ability to benefit from such developments may themselves be encouraged by land reform.

The continuing relevance of this demonstration of the importance of land reform, published in 2009, is vindicated and reinforced by resurgent (and regrettably belated) interest in agriculture in the last few years (for its role in food production, income generation and food security), and by external investments in agricultural land as a response to this. The threats posed by some of these investments require continued attention to Lipton’s definition of land reform, albeit in a more ‘defensive’ role than the land reforms that are the main subject of the book. However this relevance serves to highlight three related ways in which, in an ideal world, the book might be improved.

First, despite the statement in the introduction that the book is not by Nostrodamus and does not seek to predict the future of land reforms, I wish it did not finish quite so abruptly. Despite the book’s length, I would have appreciated a little more – a final chapter summing up the main lessons from the book for the next genera-

tion of researchers, analysts and practitioners in the field. This could have highlighted principles, questions and issues that need to be taken forward and developed in the context of new situations and challenges – for example climate change, water scarcity, urbanisation, the economic growth in middle income countries, changes in global relations, foreign investment and ownership, and high food prices. Second, the layout of the book – the arrangement and hierarchy of sections and sub-sections – does not make its structure very easy to follow. This is unfortunate given the sharp structure of the book's arguments as it deals with complex and multiple interacting issues. A little more sign posting and summing up would make the book more accessible and, given the importance of its contents, more useful. Finally, and this is an illustration of the previous two points, I would have liked to see more explicit attention to interactions of land reform with gender and the environment. Both these topics have multiple entries in the index, but these seem rather disparate: some more focussed and structured attention to these issues would have been helpful.

These are minor gripes. This is an important, serious and helpful book which should make a lasting contribution. This review cannot better the book's own closing words: 'The debate about land reform is alive and well. So is land reform itself. And so they should be.'

Andrew Dorward
Centre for Development, Environment and Policy;
School of Oriental and African Studies
Andrew.Dorward@soas.ac.uk