

Gender Mainstreaming the A Critical Assessment

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Cet article présente une analyse des implications genrées liées au discours basé sur les droits qui fait partie du « Rapport sur les politiques de recherche, les politiques territoriales pour diminuer la croissance et la pauvreté. » récemment publié par la Banque mondiale. L'auteure assure qu'il n'y a rien de neuf dans ce discours libéral sur les droits à la propriété, elle critique, dévoile et analyse les assumptions entre les différentes formes de droits sécuritaires à la propriété et dont les deux enjeux sont la diminution de la production et de la pauvreté. Les buts du rapport, par ailleurs très louables, sont intenables considérant les moyens prescrits et les politiques de base qui vont ultimement blesser ceux qu'ils veulent aider.

Land reform has long been regarded as a key aspect of development strategies aiming to transform land ownership structures to reflect democratic principles of equitable access and to redress histories of dispossession and exclusion suffered by the poor during the colonial period. In recent years, however, a proliferation of research on the role that land plays in promoting economic growth and good governance has led to a renewed emphasis on the need for land reform to reduce rural disparities and improve agricultural productivity and food security, among other things. The World Bank's contribution to this literature is a recently published policy research report, *Land Policies for Growth and Poverty Reduction* (hereafter, *Land Policies*), which elaborates the Bank's thinking on a range of issues pertaining to land, including land reform, land markets, land institutions and administration, ru-

ral credit, and customary tenure. As the World Bank continues to play a lead role in setting policy agendas in

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developing countries, the release of this report is extremely significant and provides a unique opportunity to examine its vision for the future of land relations in developing countries.

This paper challenges the notion that *Land Policies* contributes anything new to the liberal discourse on property rights. Although its conclusions and policy recommendations are said to rest on an objective analysis of a wide-range of empirical research on land relations and rural development, the information that is selected tends only to reinforce deeply-held, but often simplistic assumptions about the relationship between various forms of property rights, economic growth, and poverty reduction. The aim of this paper is to examine some of the factors

that have not been taken into account in the rights-based approach for land reform presented in *Land Policies*, and what implications these omissions hold for women. In particular, the study challenges the report's attempt to link the promotion of land and rural credit markets to "sustainable development" (i.e., economic, social and environmental betterment) by revealing the reliance of its strategy on exploitative gender relations and women's unpaid labour. The analysis presents a fundamental critique of the way in which land policy research is done by arguing that it is necessary to move beyond the tendency to emphasize the importance of land rights in isolation of the many other factors that determine the relative success of land policy initiatives. To this effect, the paper is divided into four sections: Section I presents an overview of the aims and recommendations of *Land Policies*; Section II outlines some of the problematic assumptions contained in the report and delineates their association with a long-standing discourse on property rights; Section III presents a gender critique of the report by obviating the many factors that are not considered in the strategy presented; and finally, Section IV concludes the analysis with a discussion of the troublesome implications of policies based on the recommendations of the report.

I. The World Bank's New Land Agenda

Land Policies is the culmination of the World Bank's three-year review of its involvement in land reform. The report was drafted in 2001 with

Tragedy of Property Rights of the World Bank's Land Agenda

the collaboration of multilateral and bilateral organizations,¹ and posted on the website of the World Bank's Land Policy and Administration Group for consultation thereafter. In the summer of 2002, the Bank held a series of regional workshops to receive feedback on the draft report from civil society groups and other interested parties, and to obtain technical input from key policy makers, academics, and representatives of civil society.² Subsequently, many of the major bilateral and multilateral development agencies are revisiting their approaches to land issues (e.g. DFID, 2002) and some, including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), are addressing land reform issues for the first time at the policy level.³ As such, *Land Policies* has prompted a great deal of discussion among policy makers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and the broader development community, as well as a general push to promote a "comprehensive and integrated approach" to land policy amongst them. Given the powerful influence of multilateral and bilateral agencies in setting the agenda for 'development' in the South, there is good reason to believe that *Land Policies* will have a substantial impact on the resolution of land issues for many years to come.

The World Bank's last public pronouncement on land issues was the 1975 *Land Reform Policy Paper*. This earlier report analyzed land largely in terms of agricultural use and productivity and advocated the creation of land markets and the privatization of land. In critical reflection, the authors of the present report note that the 1975 paper

devoted little attention to the importance of land rights for empowering the poor and im-

The report's attempt to link the promotion of land and rural credit markets to "sustainable development" reveals the reliance of its strategy on exploitative gender relations and women's unpaid labour.

proving local governance, the development of the private sector outside agriculture, the gender and equity aspects associated with land, and the problems arising on marginal areas and at the interface between rural and urban areas. (2003: xliv)

Land Policies is presented as an attempt to "strengthen the effectiveness of land policy in support of development and poverty reduction" (2003: ix) by summarizing and drawing policy-relevant conclusions from the results of recent research on land issues around the world.

The report begins by stating that the way in which land rights are defined is of fundamental importance for the emergence of markets, poverty reduction, economic growth,

private sector investment, good governance, and the overall welfare of rural populations. The content of the report revolves around three main tenets. First, providing secure tenure to land creates incentives needed for investment in land, "a key element underlying sustainable economic growth" (WB 2003: x). It is posited that, by enhancing the asset base of people whose rights to property are insecure or neglected, secure tenure to land improves the well-being of the poor. Second, the productivity advantage of small-scale farms makes the facilitation of the exchange and distribution of land important to expedite their access to land and the development of financial markets that rely on the use of land as collateral. The report argues that removing impediments to the access of formal credit and rental markets for small farm owners will generate equity advantages and establish the basis for a positive investment climate and the diversification of economic activity in the rural non-farm sector. Finally, it argues that governments have a role to play in the evolution toward more secure tenure rights and in creating appropriate incentives for sustainable land use to avoid negative externalities and the degradation of natural resources.

In contrast to the 1975 paper, *Land Policies* draws on a broad range of historical and micro-level empirical data in order to highlight the complexities of land relations. In doing so, it demonstrates the need for diverse approaches to land reform and development in ways that are economically, politically, socially, and environmentally desirable. Consequently, *Land Policies* has been ac-

knowledge by many scholars and development practitioners as a significant turning point for the World Bank's approach to land policy. The report moves beyond the familiar call for the privatization of land and the promotion of land markets that has long been a hallmark of the institution's structural adjustment agenda, recognizing instead that this kind of policy advice may not be appropriate in countries where market economies are functioning imperfectly or are not fully developed.⁴ Furthermore, the report states that increasing tenure security in land does not necessarily require making land transferable through a sales markets (WB 2003: 70), and that in some cases common property, rental or lease arrangements may be more appropriate than individualized tenure. For these reasons, *Land Policies* is widely applauded for acknowledging the limitations of past approaches to land policy that do not take into account the fact that patterns of land ownership, access, and use are not simply the product of the supply and demand dynamics of an impersonal market, but rather the result of "political power struggles and non-economic restrictions" (WB 2003: 6). The extent of its attention to questions of equity (e.g., stronger land rights for women, herders, Indigenous peoples, and other historically disadvantaged populations) and human rights considerations is also viewed as a novel turn for the Bank. In the foreword of the report, the chief economist of the WB, Nicholas Stern, writes: "(D)ealing with efficiency will not automatically also resolve all equity issues" (2003: xi).

Despite explicit recognition of the political basis of land ownership and access patterns in the *Land Policies* report, the World Bank seems extraordinarily non-cognizant of its own implication in a powerful, old, and deeply-entrenched discourse on private property rights and, by connotation, its role in (both implicitly and explicitly) advocating one particular model of development: namely "the

gradual individualization of property rights to land" (WB 2003: 32) on grounds that it "provides the greatest incentives for efficient resource use" (22). Although it is nowhere stated in the report that privatization of land is the only option, it emphasizes the need to speed up the natural evolution of more secure (and ultimately private) tenure systems for land. This evolutionary model of land tenure reform reflects western notions of property rights which have

The persistent focus on technical, rights-based solutions to rural poverty is problematic when one begins to look at the gendered division of labour, power, and control inside the "household" and, more broadly, in society at large.

been codified over centuries in what has come to be known as the "property rights school" (PRS). Before moving on to a discussion of the gender implications of this discourse as they are presented in the policy recommendations of *Land Policies*, it is vital to first reveal its theoretical affiliation with the PRS and to discuss the limitations this discourse imposes on discussions of land relations and policy.

II. Reinventing the Tragedy of Private Property

Despite its many caveats, exceptions, and left turns, *Land Policies* clearly exhibits the dominant view of the PRS—that private property is far superior and represents a higher level of economic development than com-

mon property arrangement.⁵ It is assumed that, by default, when a society reaches a particular stage of development (i.e., high population growth and increasing scarcity and valuation of land) common property institutions will "naturally" evolve in the direction of individual tenures.⁶ The transition is thus regarded to be an *internal, natural, and rational* response to exogenous changes. Expected "benefits" from new security of tenure include: the transfer of land from less to more dynamic farmers; increased availability and access to credit; increased willingness and ability of owners to invest in their land and to manage it with future benefits and generations in mind; and, overall, improved economic well-being (Platteau; Sjaastad and Bromley). For the PRS, then, private property is considered an essential ingredient in economic development because it creates incentives for owners to innovate and invest in their land. "Tenure security" is desirable as a means to the larger goal of encouraging the transfer or reallocation of land and other collective resources from less to more dynamic users, thereby encouraging economic growth, food security, and rural poverty reduction.

Although *Land Policies* presents a far more sophisticated and nuanced version of this thesis, there is little ambiguity about its theoretical lineage. This is made clear when *Land Policies* discusses the benefits of tenure security:

By defining who is entitled to reap the benefit streams that flow from a given resource and thereby establishing correspondence between the effort expended in trying to increase the value of this resource and the reward to be had from such activity, land rights are not only a key element of the social fabric of most societies, but also a critical determinant of investment, and thus of economic growth. (2003: 8)

In other words, the formal "defi-

niton” of property rights is a crucial determinant of investment and economic growth by ensuring that people invest the optimal amounts of labour and/or resources needed to extract sustainably the maximum benefits from land. Despite the fact that the report acknowledges that the individualization of land tenure is “by no means a linear process or a historical necessity” and that policies must provide “sufficient flexibility to respond to local needs” (WB 2003: 32), the basic PRS formula (security = investment = growth) remains intact.⁷

The boundaries that delineate the hegemonic PRS discourse limit the extent to which contemporary debates about land relations and rural or agricultural development more broadly deviate from questions of “rights” and “efficiency.” Whereas the later (efficiency) has long dominated these discussions, the entrance of the former (rights) into land policy discussions at major international institutions like the World Bank victory won more recently thanks to the efforts of scholars, activists and professionals interested in the equity dimensions of property relations. Despite the undeniably important inclusivity that this change represents, a concentration on question of *rights* to land directs attention away from the many other factors that also determine the broader social, ecological, and economic impact of land policy interventions. As will be demonstrated in the following section, the equation in *Land Policies* of the promotion of equitable and efficient land and credit markets with equitable growth and poverty reduction is substantially weakened when one takes into account the impact of many ways women are subordinate within the family, on the land and within communities (e.g., the gendered nature of labour and asset distribution).

III. Gender Analysis of Land Policies

In the land and rural development

research and policy advice presented in *Land Policies*, women are directly considered only in relation to the lack of formal rights and access they have to land (WB 2003: 38). While attention to this is merited, it is important to note the disconnection that exists in the report between its concern for women’s *individual* rights and its main focus on the promotion of *household* landholding patterns that reflect the most efficient organization of production.

The report is advocating policies to support the efficiency of small farms if their efficiency-producing productivity advantage is based on exploitative labour relations and the un-equal position of women in the household.

The main impetus for land reform, according to the report, is the reorganization of property rights not through government-implemented programs of redistribution but through reform of credit markets so that land markets will naturally favour the most efficient agricultural producers. According to the report, small-scale family farms have a natural “productivity advantage” over large farm operations that are reliant on waged labour (WB 2003: 81).⁸ However, it is noted that the productivity advantage of family farms is not enjoyed by society because other factors—such as the ability to access capital and technology—are not equal between large operators and family farmers (WB 2003: 81). Noting that “imperfections in input, product, credit, and insurance markets” can

affect the functioning of land markets and lead to outcomes “that deviate from what one would expect in a hypothetical situation of perfectly functioning markets” (2003: 82), *Land Policies* advocates two necessarily related strategies: First, access to or (preferably) ownership of land by small farmers must be ensured because, without secure rights, there is little or no incentive for them to invest in land productively and/or sustainably. Second, because security of tenure would not be possible or sufficient if smallholders cannot access formal credit, distortions in the credit market that cause banks to favour large and medium farms over small ones need to be overcome.⁹

Thus, the PRS-inspired argument presented in *Land Policies* proposes that more secure rights augmented by policies that will address credit-market biases and imperfections will increase the incentive of small farming households to invest in and care for land sustainably, leading to private and societal improvement through subsequent growth and equity gains. The acknowledgement in the report that securing property tenure will not automatically lead to investment and ensuing benefits as long as there are distortions in credit and other markets is evidence of the increasing sophistication of the old PRS discourse. However, the persistent focus in *Land Policies* on technical, rights-based solutions to rural poverty (e.g., the removal of “policy-induced” credit market distortions so that land markets can function efficiently and award relative gains to small, land-poor farming households) is extremely problematic when one begins to look at the gendered division of labour, power, and control *inside* the “household” and, more broadly, within society at large. The assumption is that making credit accessible to small-scale farmers will lead to the automatic and natural evolution of tenure arrangements that favour the most efficient producer. In this case, as the report makes clear, it is small-scale, family farmers who

would stand to gain. The question that must be asked now is *who within* the family farms will benefit. Astonishingly, despite the attention paid earlier in the report to the inadequacy of unitary models of the “household” (WB 2003: 38), at no time does the report discuss *who* comprises this highly efficient, unpaid, and supposedly willing workforce. Given the fact that women have been recognized widely as the principal producers in the agricultural sphere in the south,¹⁰ it can be deducted that the report is implicitly referring to the labour of women. The assumption, therefore, is that women’s “underutilized” (WB 2003: 82) labour will be available at no cost as an extension of their reproductive labour in the household. It is obviously problematic that the report is advocating policies to support the efficiency of small farms if, as is often the case, their efficiency-producing productivity advantage is based on exploitative labour relations and the un-equal position of women within the household.¹¹

On a related point, it is also worth critically assessing what the implications might be to women of using land as collateral to access formal credit. Given the fluctuations of commodity markets, it may be difficult for family farms to repay their debt if agricultural production is the primary means of income generation. Where this is the case, pressure on the productivity of unwaged female labour (the factor that supposedly makes small-scale farms more productive in the first place) will increase. This will result in the *extensification* of unpaid labour (e.g., the recruitment children) and the *intensification* of labour (i.e., longer hours). Furthermore, as is pointed out in *Land Policies*, the capital attained through the mortgaging of land will free up and enable members of the household to develop non-farm enterprises (WB 2003: 58). There is, however, a strong likelihood that men will be the ones who leave the farm and, by implication,

leave women at home to farm mortgaged land alone. Commenting on this point, Ambreena Manji warns that, “it will ultimately be women’s labour on the land which services rural debt” (105).

In sum, within the family structure of farming households, the impact of the policies for rural development and poverty alleviation presented in *Land Policies* are likely to be detrimental to the interests of women. Ironically, women are identified in the report as one of the main targets for assistance through policies to improve their access and rights to land. The focus in *Land Policies* on the need to secure the “equality of women’s land rights to those of men” (WB 2003: 38) is commendable, but essentially useless if women in their roles as labourers, co-owners, and mortgagers is not taken into consideration. Once these considerations are taken into account, it becomes clear that the interests of women may not figure very high at the World Bank.

IV. Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that the “rights-based” discourse presented in *Land Policies* reproduces many of the problematic assumptions inherent in the liberal, PRS-inspired approach to questions of land, labour and capital. Although its strategy for rural development—i.e., securing the property rights of land-poor but efficient small farms by addressing credit and other market imperfections in order to increase their incentives to invest in and care for land sustainably—appears sound, it builds on a series of unexplored assumptions about the supposedly shared interests of rural farming “households” and, by extension, the impact of tenure security on individuals and society more broadly.

The almost exclusive attention focused on the importance of individual or collective (e.g., the household, the community) *rights* to land in contemporary discourses about

land relations and land policy typically functions to minimize consideration of the other possible interests people have in land. In *Land Policies*, women are directly considered only in relation to their lack of formal rights and access to land (WB 2003: 38). While attention to this is merited, the report entirely neglects to consider the impact of the gendered relations of power and privilege within the small-scale farming household, which are at the heart of its strategy for the empowerment of land-poor populations and overall social and economic development. When such factors are taken into account, the growth and poverty-reduction objectives of *Land Policies* become untenable insofar as they exclude women or, worse, exacerbate their relative positions of disadvantage within households and larger society. By only considering the importance of removing policy-induced barriers to producers’ *rights* to land, the report neglects to account for the many political, social, and economic factors that disadvantage women. As women comprise a significant target population for the benefits of the policy paper’s recommendations (WB 2003: 57), this critique presents a formidable challenge to the hypotheses and promises outlined in *Land Policies*.

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¹Including the Department for International Development in the UK, the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit in Germany, and the United States Agency for International Development.

²See the World Bank’s Land Policy and Administration web page at: <http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/>

ESSD/ essdext.nsf/24ByDocName/
LandPolicyandAdministration for
information about these workshops.

³At the time of writing, a small team
in the Policy Branch at CIDA is
nearing completion of the organiza-
tion's first land policy. See Pestieau
and Tait for more details.

⁴It is noted in the report that, "re-
searchers now widely recognize that
in the presence of multiple market
and institutional imperfections, 'first-
best' policy advice that was based on
an ideal world of perfect markets
without transaction costs and struc-
tural rigidities is unlikely to be ap-
propriate" (WB 2003: 6).

⁵This idea is implicit in comments
like: "The desirability of group rights
will often decrease with economic
development" (WB 2003: 31).

⁶The conceptual underpinnings of
this proposition were most clearly
spelled out in a seminal essay by
Demsetz. The most notable applica-
tion and apparent confirmation of
Demsetz's theories is that of North
and Thomas in their study of Euro-
pean economic history and the evo-
lution of property.

⁷It is not within the scope of this
paper to discuss the many problems
with this rationally-persuasive equa-
tion. For critiques of the PRS, see:
Ellsworth; Platteau; Sjaastad and
Bromley.

⁸This is because smaller family farms
can adjust to "the vagaries of nature"
(i.e. the weather, natural disasters,
etc.) and "the spatial dispersion of
the production process" (i.e. travel
between scattered plots) without in-
curring extra costs (WB 2003: 81);
and, because family labour has "higher
incentives to provide effort" it does
not need costly managerial supervi-
sion. Although the report fails to
make this point explicit, the relative
efficiency of family farms is also a
function of the fact that family mem-
bers (especially women and children)
are not financially remunerated for
their work.

⁹Because the costs of and political
impediments to foreclosing on small-
holders' is high, financing is often

unavailable or excessively expensive.

¹⁰This is a fact that is even acknowl-
edged (although only briefly) in the
report (WB 2003: 58).

¹¹In her analysis of the first draft of
Land Policies, Manji points out that
where the term for "family labour"
was "non-contractible effort," that
"the idea of 'non-contractibility' takes
the private sphere of the household
to be characterized by affective ties of
community, which give rise to soli-
darity between individuals" (103).
In contrast, she notes that "the pri-
vate sphere is often based on quasi-
feudal domination and on coercion
rather than freedom."

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