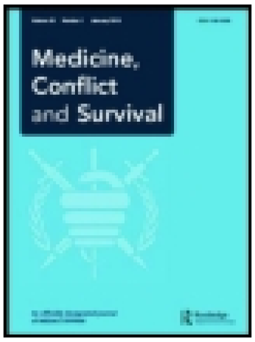

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Land Security and the Earth Summit

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The Earth Summit is criticized for failing to address the key issues of land distribution, rights and security. Examples are given of the gross maldistribution of land ownership, and of agricultural and forestry policies which hazard the future of small landholders, both by governments and outsiders. The harmful environmental effects of these policies are described, and a call made for alternative policies which will allow ordinary people to conserve the land and forests on which they depend.

KEYWORDS Appropriate development Environmental damage Land ownership

Many have criticized the June 1992 Earth Summit for its paucity of results. A more serious criticism would focus on the conference's premises and organization. By legitimizing the assumption that human misery and degradation of land, water and air can be dealt with through continued massive, top-down, globalized applications of Northern capital, predatory trading agreements, and white, male, middle-class expertise, the Rio meeting has reinforced the power imbalances, censorship of history, and suppression of ordinary people's systems of knowledge which fuelled the problems in the first place. Certifying the competence and authority of government leaders and technocrats to speak volubly at each other about issues they have little understanding of or interest in, the conference took place on a 'Summit' whose altitude only increased the leaders' isolation from the difficult realities of the world beneath, while preventing many of those looking up from below from recognizing the full extent of the leaders' ignorance and irrelevance. In this respect, the Earth Summit was not useless; it was positively harmful. Any attempt to move forward from it must start by taking the backwardness of its conception into account.

Nowhere were the failures of the Earth Summit's approach more obvious than with respect to the central issues of land insecurity and land rights. In dozens of countries, land distribution is today skewed more grotesquely than ever before. In Guatemala, two per cent of private landowners hold 63 per cent of the land; in Scotland three per cent hold 98 per cent; and in Brazil nine million families are landless while 328,000 square kilometres of land lie idle and 360,000 remain under the control of transnational corporations. In the

Philippines, meanwhile, 72 per cent of rural households are landless or near-landless, up from 18 per cent in 1903 and 50 per cent in 1961.

Even for many smallholders who have been able to retain their land, the future holds visions of debt and foreclosure speeded by the advance of cash cropping, the Green Revolution, and modern high-tech agriculture. In the United Kingdom, the number of farms has halved since 1950; in Sri Lanka, the World Bank has pressured the government to *invite* foreign companies to take over small farmers' plots for export agriculture and contract farming. Throughout South-East Asia, speculation and land-grabbing spurred by industrialization and tourism development make it nearly impossible for many small farmers to hold on to land. State control over land, moreover, often only makes the situation worse. In Indonesia, the Forest Department's legal control over 74 per cent of the country's land area enables it to brush aside the claims of 30 to 40 million forest residents when it wants to hand out land for corporate or government projects; in Thailand, 10 million peasant 'squatters' are legally subject to eviction by a Royal Forest Department which has jurisdiction over more than 40 per cent of the country's surface and is eager to promote commercial tree plantations and American-style 'protected areas'. In East Malaysia, where land still belongs in theory to local communities, a concession system has been illegally imposed by the state on top of customary tenure to enable outsiders to benefit from logging.

The effects are predictable. While land used for export crops has increased in Guatemala, Brazil and the Philippines, land planted to local staples has actually declined, contributing to a situation in which most children in all three countries are malnourished. In the Philippines, 40 to 45 per cent of all agricultural land produces crops which are shipped abroad. Without land security, meanwhile, farmers have little reason to conserve or improve their plots' fertility, and without community rights to local forest or pasture they have little reason to prevent over-exploitation. In Kenya, the privatization and reservation of communal grazing land has led to over-grazing as local peoples are deprived of customary pastures. In India, state or private take-over of community forests has meant erosion and loss of water sources. In the United States, land concentration has been an intimate part of a process which robs the soil of fertility, depletes water tables, and increases pesticide contamination.

One of the most notable effects of land insecurity is deforestation.[1] Pushed off land by the powerful, peasants from Colombia to Ivory Coast and from Bangladesh to Indonesia have little choice but to clear forests, often with the help of logging roads or government resettlement programmes. Once in the forests, moreover, they often have to keep on the move due to the encroachment of large landowners or their own inability to adapt to a harsh and unfamiliar environment; thus some Amazonian migrant families have moved as many as 25 times.

The Earth Summit's response to these issues was to sideline smoothly any responsible discussion of land insecurity while simultaneously encouraging the forces which exacerbate it. This was hardly surprising. The Summit was designed to produce blanket solutions friendly to governments, 'aid' agencies and corporations. Problems of land insecurity and land rights, on the other hand, are subtle, complex, varied, and as a rule only exacerbated by foreign 'aid' and corporate involvement. Addressing them seriously entails eschewing 'global' solutions and instead reviewing the lessons of a wide range of particular cases: the local effects of the encroachment of the market; the failures of collectivization; the dwindling relevance of land-for-the-tiller and tenancy reform programmes in the many areas of the world in which numbers of tenants are decreasing; the commercialization of land and undermining of customary law which often results from official titling programmes; and the trade agreements which may encourage forest clearance in one country but be the lesser of two evils in others. Most of all, it entails recognizing the destructiveness of an approach which removes authority over the disposition of land from communities who have proved their effectiveness in using it over generations and instead places it in the hands of government bureaucracies, foreign forestry planners, dam builders, or transnational or local companies planting tree or other crops. It is this destructive approach – one which focuses on the amounts of 'aid' to be given rather than examining the damage that 'aid' causes in practice – which the Rio Summit and most of its critics have championed.

A more sensible priority would be to work closely with local groups to stop foreign 'aid' programmes which deprive people of the land they need to support themselves. Thus, instead of pressing their country's government to increase its overseas development 'assistance' to 0.7 per cent of Gross Domestic Product, concerned members of the British public could perhaps better spend their time by co-operating with Indian peasants and activists in opposing the Overseas Development Administration's support for the World Bank decision to fund the Sardar Sarovar project in India – a grandiose project which will uproot 100,000 rural people and flood thousands of hectares of fertile farmland and forest.[2] They could also demand an investigation of the Commonwealth Development Corporation's investment in Thailand's Soon Hua Seng company, a eucalyptus-growing firm notorious for its promotion of land speculation and illegal forest-clearance operations. Such actions, by helping to alleviate the pressures which threaten ordinary people's ability to conserve the land and forests on which they depend, are positive and constructive in a way that Earth Summits are likely never to be.

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