Land, Habitat and Our Commitment to Change

Statement of the Habitat International Coalition on International Housing and Land Rights Day 2010

Land is essential to realizing the human rights to adequate housing and livelihood, and, thus, to human dignity and well-being. For many communities, their tenure on their land means no less than life itself. In our world on this International Housing and Land Rights Day (Habitat Day), we face the deepening challenge of urban expansion on the land, while rural and productive land becomes the subject of ever-greater commodification, contention and conflict.

This challenge is taking an ominous turn from the past. In previous decades, governments promised that land tenure reforms would generate a surplus in agricultural production to feed and finance greater urbanization and industrial production. Today, the world’s population is already over half urban,¹ and a global land rush is upon us, intensifying competition over tenure across borders and regions, as well as between social groups. Meanwhile, the food crisis of 2007–08 and the subsequent financial meltdown, largely triggered by another rush—for unaffordable private housing ownership—have not curbed the greed for quick and questionable profits, nor discouraged the trend of irresponsible overconsumption and development that concentrate in our cities. Some of the most absurd formations of urban development are taking place where ever-denser urban populations have far exceeded the carrying capacity of the land, and where adequate food production and water extraction are unsustainable.

We still hear the promise of sustainable development, but international agencies can do little more than manage poverty, let alone eradicate it. In light of the structural social and economic inequities inside our cities, as well as the policy imbalances between urban and rural priorities, can we claim the moral ground to suggest that our cities are getting better?

Indeed, are we getting better?

Discredited, but not extinct, are the claims that new tenure regimes and intensified forms of land use would stem rural poverty by driving export-led growth, and even that new agricultural modernization would promote greater representation for and by the rural poor. More often, rather, innovated rural water user associations and global land grabbing have swamped small-scale farmers under more-aggressive private and corporate interests.

Not better than the last unspeakable half millennium of colonization, entire land-based communities are becoming dispossessed and destitute from land grabbing by national elites, land mafias and international profit seekers. Neither is outright colonization of the land by any means just a vestige of the past, particularly under persistent military occupations, where certain housing and land rights violations constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Food security may be the formal impetus for certain of the current wave of investors in rain-fed agriculture, especially from land- and water-poor countries, but the undeniable harm inflicted on local and indigenous communities in the process cannot be justified. Seeking concentrated forms of tenure and production and higher rent values are not the prescription for sustained increases in productivity, farmer welfare or food security, as stagnating projects can testify.² Even this year’s overly touted World Bank report on the global farmland grab, with its commodity perspective on land, equivocates on the utility of large-scale agriculture.³ It makes no mention of “food sovereignty,” the current term for the optimum food security objective of people and communities, as well as states.
Increased rural debt, displacement and dispossession, especially of women-headed households, have increased with a return of indentured labor and the power of the revamped landed gentry, whereas most are absentee and distant urban dwellers or faceless corporations. Direct foreign investment in land has emerged too often as a new form of subsidy from rural poor to the rich and obscenely rich. Land rights of traditional users—small farmers, pastoralists and indigenous peoples—have been trampled, while encroachment by mechanized farms has destroyed natural vegetation, degraded land, and formed producers to abandon their farms. Worse yet, suicides of destitute farmers have spiked as the only remaining option under life-crushing debt and/or foreclosed access to credit in favor of corporate interests with greater “bargaining power” and access to vital information concentrated in the cities.

If the human loss were not enough, the forfeiture of biodiversity and small farmers' local knowledge is a cost especially dear to all humanity and its planet. Unbridled urban production and consumption doubtlessly have driven current climate change, which exacerbates the day-to-day struggle for land, water and natural resources for subsistence.

Land grabbing that forecloses land access has contributed to serious local and wider-scale conflicts. The unending tragedy of Darfur is emblematic: A lethal cycle of violence arising from ill-advised land-tenure reform that outlawed symbiotic traditions of land-management. Such policies have pitted pastoral and settled people against each other, while subsequent drought, famine and, ultimately, political interests have transformed the conflict beyond the sight of its origins and obscured the land-based lessons from the official record of global politics.

For land-based people, communities and human settlements, the land is becoming an unsustainable place to live. The consequent outmigration and displacement only add to the self-fulfilling prophesy of an "urbanizing world." The facts and their consequences behind that process should give pause to our commemoration of this International Housing and Land Rights Day (Habitat Day).

While cities may aspire to grow and gleam, our collective ability to learn and apply the ample lessons of our wasteful past seems to grow ever dim. This day, we recognize that, increasingly for the people on the land, the dream of attaining and sustaining a secure place to live in peace, rights and dignity, without structural change, is dimming as well. Nonetheless, some of us still actually aspire to be better—for the cities, but especially for the land and its peoples. But in the glaring light of increasingly dire climate change and limited land-based resources, we all have to change fundamentally, for the habitat of this and future generations.

[For a case-based analysis of current trends in housing and land violations from the Violation Database, see HIC’s Housing and Land Rights Network report on International Housing and Land Rights Day (Habitat Day), 4 October 2010, at: www.hlrn.org.]

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3 See discussion of the value of rural investment in small-scale farming in Land Grabbing and nutrition: Challenges for global governance, Right to Food and Nutrition Watch [print and CD formats] (Heidelberg: Brot für die Welt, ICCO and FIAN, October 2010).
5 As in the illustrative case of Ethiopia, World Bank report, op. cit., p. 78.