

LAND REFORM

THE POWER OF PROPERTY: A PRIVILEGE FOR A FEW

The feudal lord, the local squire, the village chief, the hacienda owner, the rancher and the plantation baron. They owned, or own, expansive acres, and they pull the strings of power.

In recent years, attention has focused again on the uneven distribution of income. According to Oxfam, the world's 85 richest people are as wealthy as the poorest half of humanity.

However, one resource is even more unevenly distributed than income: land. In only one country, the Côte d'Ivoire, is land distributed similarly for all, though still not equitably. In the other 49 countries for which data are available, land ownership is skewed towards the rich. Access to land is one of the main determinants of hunger; half of the households that go hungry are smallholder families, another 20 percent are landless. Research on chronic poverty shows that access to land is often crucial in determining whether households are doomed to poverty or have a chance to better their lives. Even a little more land can lead to markedly increased income. This effect is reflected in the national economy; between 1960 and 2000, countries with an equal distribution of land experienced significantly higher economic growth.

Land reform is a key demand of smallholder farmer movements worldwide. It covers a range of measures that aim to distribute land more equitably, settle people on state-owned land, or recognize and protect customary rights. In rural areas, access to land often means access to political power. But

attempts at reform often fail in the face of the existing power structures. Together with the desire to combat hunger and poverty, the quest for rural democracy is another argument in favour of land reform and fair access to land.

While more equitable land distribution does not automatically lead to broader political participation, access to land is often central to the democratization of rural societies. In the 1980s, national governments began decentralizing an increasing number of services by turning over the responsibility for natural resources and similar issues to the local level. Users of these resources have to negotiate the rules on-site. This often highlights the close links between access to land and decision-making power in the community. In one project in Kenya, the wealthiest households – those with the most land – profited most from the introduction of community-based natural resource management. Studies in Nepal and Tanzania call attention to the disadvantages suffered by the poorest users of a resource; the users are either strongly under-represented or are ignored altogether.

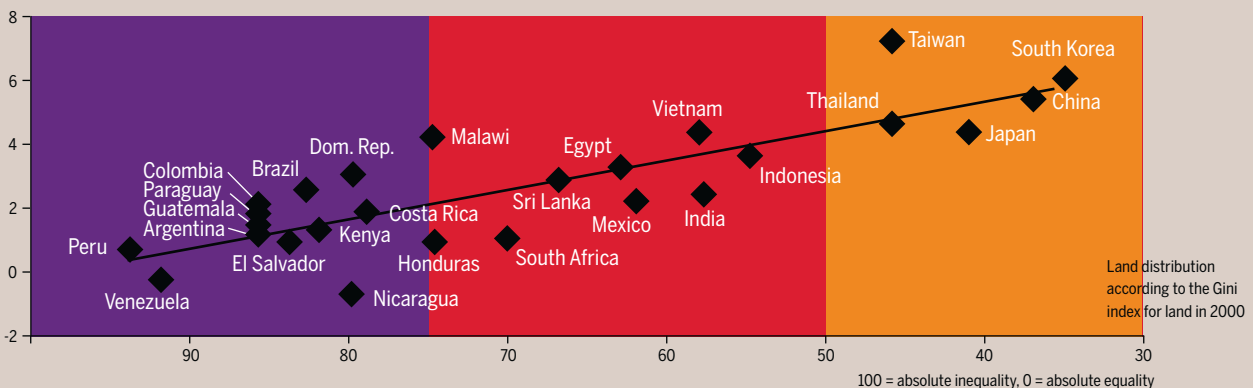
Two states in India have undergone ambitious land reforms. In Kerala, 99 percent of the households cultivate 74 percent of the arable land; in West Bengal the figure is 85 percent. In West Bengal, 51 percent of voters have a high degree of trust in their local government. In the neighbouring

If many people have access to a reasonable amount of land, national economic growth tends to be higher

HAVE LAND, WILL DEVELOP

Connection between land distribution and economic growth

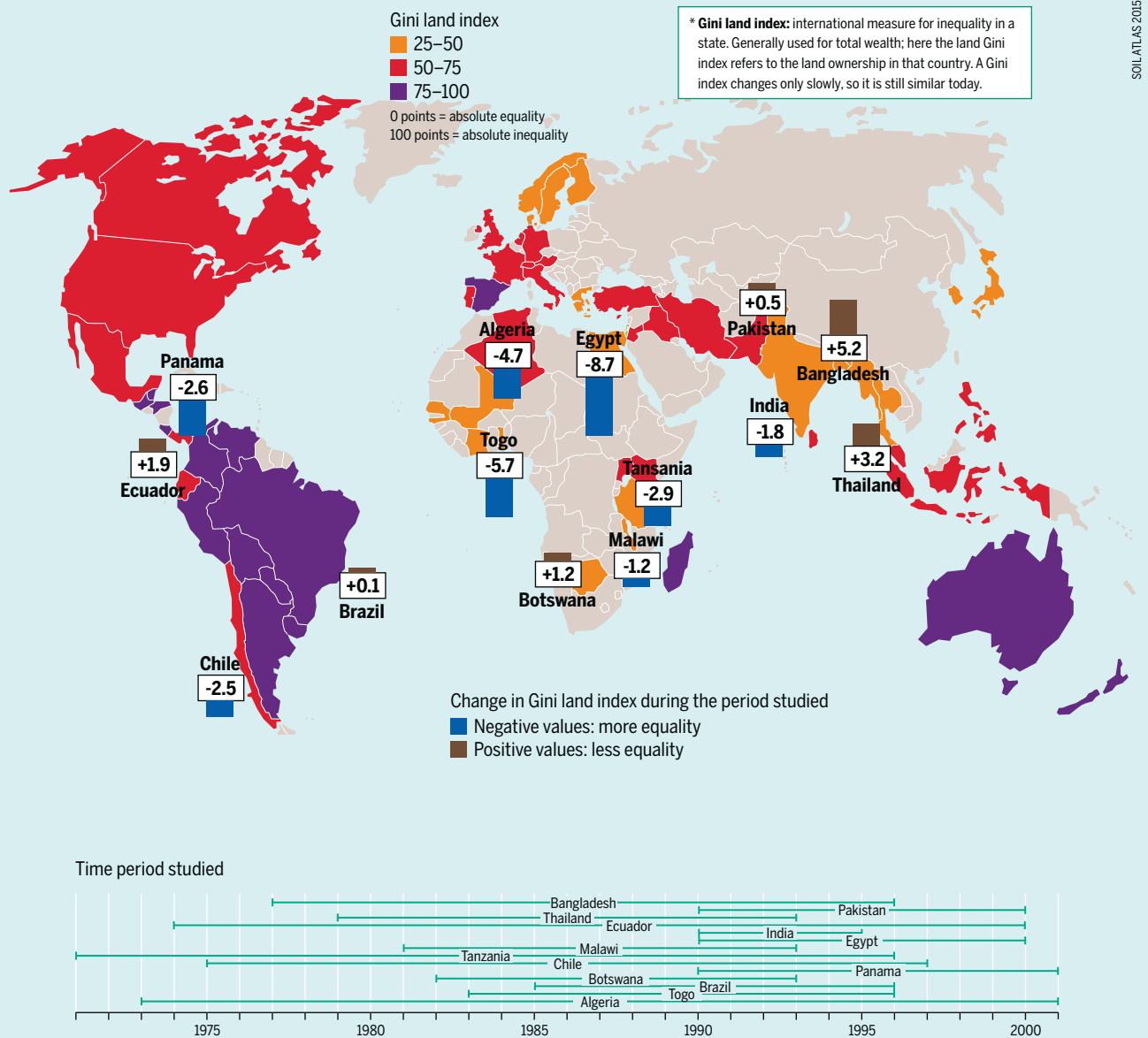
Average yearly growth of economic performance 1960–2000, in percent



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UNEQUAL LAND OWNERSHIP

Equality of distribution according to the land Gini index*, 1990, or at the end of the period indicated



Bihar, where land reforms have been much weaker, only 30 percent do.

Jump to Brazil. The former military dictatorship launched a large-scale settlement programme in the Amazon basin aimed at introducing extensive grazing. By the end of the military rule, 18 percent of the households in the state of Pará cultivated 82 percent of the farmland, even though government resettlement programmes now also supported smallholders. The establishment of new communities often fell to timber companies and ranches that had benefited from the military regime. Many communities in the Amazon are controlled by illegal loggers or ranchers and are accused of further large-scale illicit logging. The judicial system is also tainted. From 1972 to 2005, 772 murders related to land conflicts were recorded in Pará. The bosses who ordered the killings were sentenced in only three cases.

In Latin America millions of smallholder households suffer from the power of the large landowners. Occupying the land is one of the few options they are left with

Since the world food crisis in 2008, investments in land have increased. They are often accompanied by human rights abuses. In response, the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations has drawn up a set of “Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Forest and Fisheries in the Context of National Food Security”. This is the first internationally negotiated agreement to lay out the principles of good governance in rural land based on human rights. It represents a move towards more equitable distribution of land and more rural democracy. It is just one step in the right direction – but an important one. ●